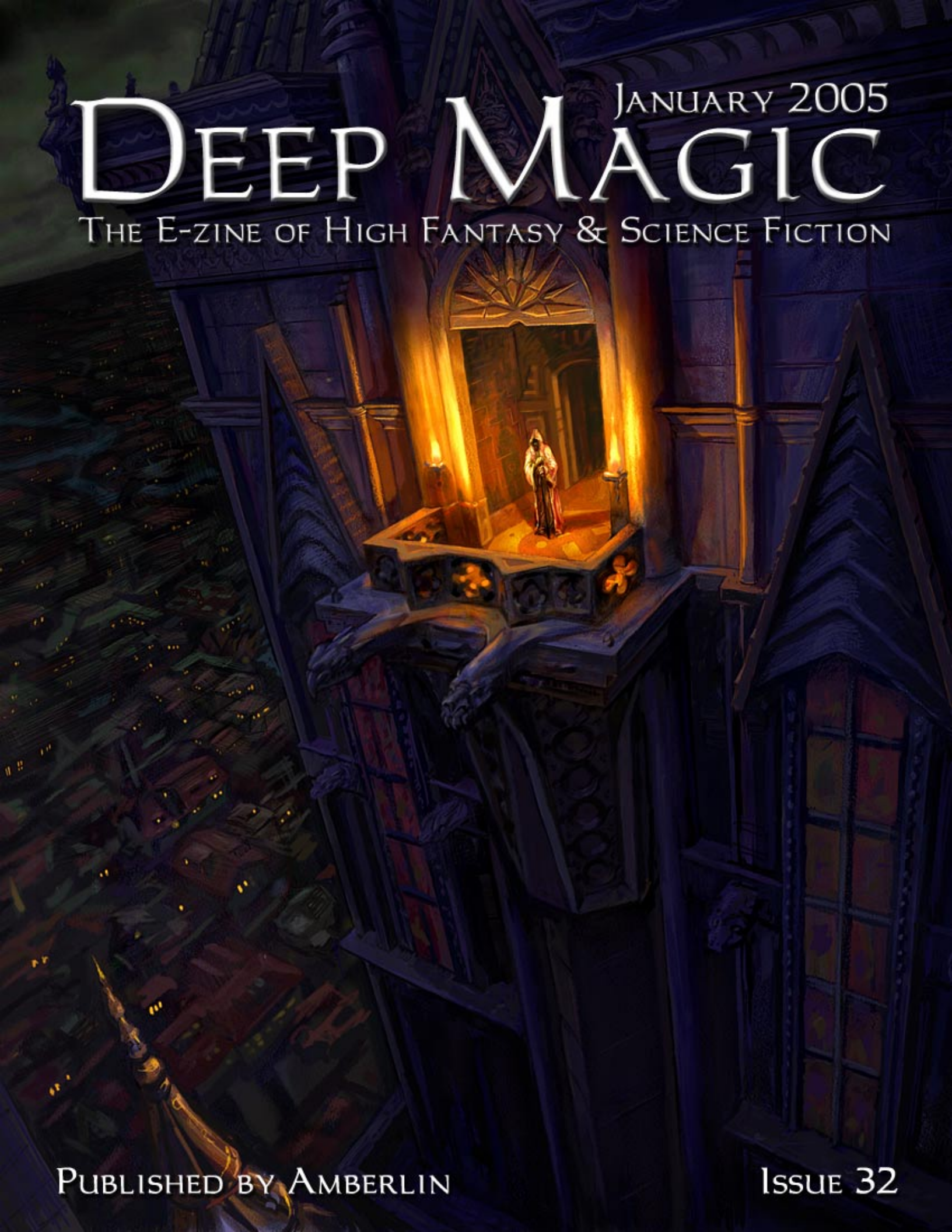


Deep Magic

January 2005

The E-zine of High Fantasy & Science Fiction

Published by Amberlin

Issue 32

Published by Amberlin, Inc.

Staff

Chief Editor – Jeremy Whitted
Managing Editor – Brendon Taylor
Contributing Editor – Jeff Wheeler
Copyediting Manager – JW Wrenn
Technology Geek – Steven Richards
Writing Challenge Editor– Usman Tanveer Malik
Book Reviews Editor – Matthew Scott Winslow
SciFi Book Reviews Editor – Rochelle Buck
Copyeditor – Mark Reeder
Copyeditor – Keri Stevenson
Copyeditor – Joel Brown
PocketDM Production – Mike Loos

Kenatos Leads – Steven Richards & Mike Loos
Submissions Review–All Editors

Graphic Design–Jeremy Whitted
Art Director–Jeff Wheeler
Associate Art Director–Reuben Fox

Marketing–Jeff Wheeler
Legal–Brendon Taylor

We would like to thank our volunteer proofreaders:
A. M. Stickel
Isaac Nydegger
L. D. Reece
Johne Cook

Website: http://www.deep-magic.net

Feedback: http://www.deep-magic.net/contact

Forums: http://www.deep-magic.net/forums

Cover by Eric Deschamps
"Balcony at Night"

Deep Magic strives to produce and publish morally responsible art and literature. Although great effort has been made to refer our readers to like-minded websites, Deep Magic is not capable of controlling the content in other sites linked to or referenced herein. Thus, Deep Magic encourages its readers to use their own discretion when visiting other sites identified on our site or in Deep Magic: The E-Zine of High Fantasy and Science Fiction.

All Content copyright © 2005
Amberlin, Inc., an Idaho Nonprofit Corporation

Table of Contents

Note From the Editors 3
Writing Challenge 4
Fantasy Short: *Boeotia* 10
Featured Artist: Eric Deschamps 11
Fantasy Short: *Sivedie and the Stolen Sight* 13
Article: Well . . . uh . . . 14
Fantasy Short: *Silent Past* 17
Amberlin Books Publications 18
Deep Magic Looks at Books 19

Subscribe to Deep Magic!

A subscription to Deep Magic is absolutely free. Each month, we will notify you when a new issue is released. You will also be notified periodically when Deep Magic has special news or offers. Go to the website and subscribe today.

If you are familiar with the internet at all, you know how common dead and broken links are. If you ever try to access a link from this e-zine and it no longer works, don't give up. Go to http://www.deep-magic.net where you will find archives of previous issues. As we catch dead and broken links, we will make a note on the corrections page for that issue. If that is the case, you will find the corrected URL there. If we have not already caught the defective link, please let us know, and we will do all we can to track down an updated URL for the information you seek. However, please keep in mind that sometimes content is taken down and is gone forever.

January 2005

Happy New Year and welcome everyone to 2005! We had an exciting time in December. Many of you are aware of the "Great Outage" of 2004 when we went off-line for about a week. We won't get into the details of the disaster, but I'm sure many of you were as relieved as we were when we came back on-line again.

When we launched the Kenatos project last year, we underestimated the interest it would invoke. For the past few months, we have received an overwhelming number of submissions set in this world. We enjoyed so many of them that we have added to the offerings in the e-zine and present for your enjoyment several new adventures. First, the story of Missy Grove and her brothers continues in Jeff Wheeler's *Boeotia*. We also offer Bill Snodgrass' interpretation of life in the hinterlands in *Silent Past*, and Amy Butler brings us a tale of thievery in *Sivedie and the Stolen Sight*.

Our cover artist this month is the inestimable Eric Deschamps and his brilliant piece, "Balcony at Night," graces our cover. We continue to be amazed by all the fantastic artwork that comes our way and the quality of the talent that is out there. We learned in our survey how much the artwork means to all of you. Each piece we present is a quest for greatness. We try not to disappoint.

We also bring back author Ays Marin, who shares her insight on pitching a book proposal to a real live, bona fide agent. Her humorous experience shows the human side of the industry.

A reminder to everyone that our latest anthology (*Deeper Magic: the Second Collection*) is available on-line through Amazon and Barnes and Noble and through most bookstores (you'll need the ISBN number to order it, most likely). For more information, visit our **Print Publications** page on our website here.

Now before we let you inside this issue, we'd like to remind everyone that next month begins our annual pledge drive. We are waiting (still) for 501c3 approval from the US Government, but during the last year we did successfully transition into a nonprofit company. All we need now is the tax exempt status. Once that happens, all donations made to us (both last year and this year) will be deductible on your taxes, even retroactively. So show your support for Deep Magic and the standards we maintain. Only a tiny percentage of our readers contributed to Deep Magic in 2004. Let's get creative in 2005 so that we can draw the best talent around to grace our pages. We have some ideas. More to come in February.

Happy New Year!

The Editors

Safe Places for Minds to Wander

Writing Challenge

Each month, Deep Magic offers an opportunity and a challenge for our readers who are also writers. These challenges are designed to help you develop your writing talents. Whether you are a novice who has never written a fictional paragraph, or a veteran of the publishing business, you are welcome to participate. As incentive, or by way of warning, we select a small number of submissions each month for publication.

To submit a challenge, go to our new online submissions system. You will need to create an author profile and account. **We have a new due date for Writing Challenge submissions!** They will be printed one month later, and you have longer to submit them. Please note the deadline date below.

January 2005 Writing Challenge Entries due February, 2005

Though primarily a Fantasy e-zine, Deep Magic also tries to include quality Science Fiction as often as possible. With that in mind, the challenge this month is simple: create a scene from a Science Fiction story. Of course, it won't be as simple as that. Since much of what makes the genre unique is the technology that drives it (warp speed, lightsabers, etc.), you must create your own unique technology, or create your own twist on a technology we're all familiar with.

The scene can be a stand-alone, or it can be part of a larger story. However, keep it to within 1000 words.

Selections from the November 2004 Writing Challenge

Haumna the Poet
The Choice of a Lifetime
Etsamore

The above stories were selected from the November challenge, which was to create a scene with a strong character.

Don't forget the December challenge due Jan10:

Love is in the air...or at least it will be by the time you are finished with this month's writing challenge. Our new format provides extra time for you to write and for us to review your submissions, but do not procrastinate. This challenge provides an additional benefit for those of us who might need an early reminder for Valentine's Day. Finally, if Wal Mart can put up Christmas decorations before Halloween, we can start talking and writing about romance at the start of December. You guessed it...since your submissions will be published in February, your challenge is to write a story of love and/or romance.

But, since when do we ever make it this easy on you? Not now. Most couples tell the story of how they met and fell in love countless times over the years. If the relationship turned sour or went down like the proverbial Titanic, those tales sound like forks on chalkboards to the party involved. So, here is the challenge: tell us the story of how two fantasy or science fiction characters (human, alien, or whatever you imagine) came together to form a relationship that changed the very stars above them, or at least the ones they saw when they first kissed. The twist is that the character hearing the story happens to be one of the romantics from the very story itself. How the character receives the tale of his or her romantic past is up to you – perhaps he is still in love and things only got better, perhaps she left him for a donkey-befriending ogre who lived in a swamp. The possibilities are endless.

We look forward to reading your tales of romance. Keep your submissions under 1000 words if possible, and remember that we are a safe place for children's minds to wander, so keep the graphic details in check.

Haumna the Poet

By Anne M. Stickel

Haumna's poetry began when he was forced to leave Kuj, the village of his birth. After it killed his favorite ox, a large rock he was moving from his field had crushed his arms, leaving him a cripple. He knew that his widowed and childless older brother, Ofelel, would care for his beautiful young wife, his three small sons, and his land. Besides, Haumna owed his brother a lot of money for helping them out since his marriage. To purchase their field, his wife had turned over all of her dowry of fine gold jewelry. Unable to support her and their sons, Haumna knew that their union and worldly goods were forfeit. But a poem weighs nothing; he did not need arms to carry his former joy in that form to lighten his heavy heart.

Though still a handsome man, Haumna knew he was an impediment to the happiness of others. Whenever he dared to leave his hut, barking dogs and dirty children chased him, the latter laughing and pointing. Elders wagged their heads, wondering what he had done to deserve such misfortune.

The day of departure came, and his faithful Alila bathed and dressed Haumna for the last time. Although she and their sons clung weeping to him, Ofelel helped him put on his sandals and slung a sack of food around his neck without a tear, but paused to whisper in his ear, "I was not blessed with your looks, your way with growing things, your wife lovelier than the sunrise, nor with even a single girl child, let alone with sons. My only talent is for usury, which has made me so unpopular that I have always felt cursed. Your beggary is fated to correct the imbalance."

"We will see, Brother," whispered Haumna back, weighing his words carefully for the sake of his sons. "In any case, I must accept what fortune has dealt me. What good would it do me to curse my fate?" And, with that, he set off down the road, deep in thought, not yet ready to sing his poem.

Ofelel watched his brother go, his own restless donkeys kicking at each other and Haumna's mean hut. They waited to be loaded with the household and its few goods. While Haumna sought his future in the city, his family would fare far better. They would exchange their mud hut, rags and clay pots for Ofelel's wooden house, soft robes and fine metal pots. Alila would once again wear the golden jewelry that had lain so long in Ofelel's strongbox.

Haumna trod the dusty path away from the village until it became a dirt road, and then a broad thoroughfare paved with stones. He had someone read him the name on the road sign: Bait al-Maqdis, the City of Sacred Magic.

Many pilgrims thronged the road. Enjoined by their varied beliefs to uplift the fallen, give alms and purge themselves of evil, they assisted Haumna in his plight. Most of the travelers wore sackcloth and ashes. Cohorts of soldiers in plumed helms with heavy cloaks covering their shining armor, protected wayfarers from brigands. Merchants plied their trades all along the route, keeping those who could afford their fare well supplied. The greater shared with the lesser folk, like Haumna. And Haumna's poetry grew within him.

Under the full moon one night Haumna repaid his place by a friendly fire and a portion of hot food with part of a poem. He sang of the others worse off than he. Instead of mocking them as his village might have, he blessed them, singing, "We are all going the same way, are we not, for whatever reason? Fate never deals blindly." Even the animals drew near and lay down to hear.

The closer the travelers came to Bait al-Maqdis, the more of his poem Haumna shared. The more he gave away, the more inspired he became. When at last Haumna strode through the gates, he was surrounded by a happy group, singing and dancing and carrying on as if they were at a wedding. They took up a collection among the wealthier celebrants and bribed the guards, so that Haumna's singing would not be interrupted.

One guard at the gate sent a runner to the golden heart of the city, which was divided into red, blue, and green zones, according to the three major beliefs. His message was, "For now, I have let this unbeliever of low caste and his irreverent followers enter. If the elders want to see why, they should stop quarreling over the size of their zones and send representatives down here."

By the time three highborn elders showed up, Haumna was too hoarse to sing, and was being fed bread and nectar by a boy as he sat atop a large rock by a cave. "You can't sit there, my lowborn friend," said the first elder. "Move from this green zone, and sacred rock which was once rolled aside to let the dead enter life again." At once, Haumna arose and departed for the blue zone. His growing crowd followed, only a little quieter than before.

After a long walk, Haumna reached the blue zone and paused to lean against a stone wall. Many people wept there, and, even though he was hot and thirsty, he too wept as the second elder scolded him, "You have no right to join their weeping, for you are not one of them. Move along, unbeliever." Haumna bowed to his better and set off for the city heights, the red zone. The weepers joined his crowd, which soon had them laughing, or at least smiling.

Haumna's boy helped him remove his sandals and mount a rock near which men were bowing and praying in their custom. The last elder, a pudgy fellow, came huffing and puffing up. As soon as this worthy caught his breath, he said, "Ignorant, rowdy cripple, don't you know that this is the jumping off point for paradise, a place of which you outcasts are unworthy?" There was murmuring from among the huge crowd surrounding them.

"A rock took away my old life. Another symbolizes a way to a new one. Still others finally let me weep freely over my loss. From atop this rock I see, not paradise, but a divided city. Stones can show me all this, and the various believers stand thus freely around me, an unbeliever, showing me tolerance. I used to hope merely to survive by begging in Bait al-Maqdis. Now I will only be satisfied to see this city unified and loudly rejoicing. I would rather have that than my arms again." The crowd cheered. The elder helped Haumna down, and invited him home. The very next day, Haumna the Poet sang at the table where the talks for unification began.

The Choice of a Lifetime

By Christina Schneider

. . . . .the sky . . .is so beautiful . . .

Nada lay upon the bloodstained ground. Her friends and commanders lay fallen on the battlefield. Nada was vaguely aware of them. To her the world was misted and far away. She gazed into the endless ocean of sapphire.

. . .the battles that were to come. . . the comrades who would defend my back . . . my dreams of glory . . .

. . . they. . . are all gone now . . .

. . . but somehow . . . I don't feel sad. . .
. . . ironic . . .

. . . . it was to be my first battle. . . . . my quiver full. . . . . my sword sheathed at my side . . . . . I was ready . . .
. . . only to be cut down . . .
. . before ever seeing the enemy . . .

. . . . it's so peaceful here . . .and silent . . .

. . . I suppose . . . .I am really dying . . .
. . .is this . . . what death feels like? . . . . . .

. . .You know . . . . I've never seen a sky so blue before . . . . so clear. . .
. . . I haven't looked to the sky in so long. . . .
. . . .I guess I have my chance. . .
. . . It's amazing that people can go about their lives . . .
. . .completely unaware . . . that we live under something so beautiful. . . and never take the time to look up . . .
. . . once in awhile. . . . .

Suddenly, a bright light appeared over Nada. The light turned into a lady as beautiful as an angel.

She smiled down upon the fallen soldier.

"Would you like to come with me, Nada?"

"Where would we go?" Nada replied.

"We could go back. Will you come?"

"I don't know . . . I'd kinda like . . . to stay here for awhile."

The lady smiled. "May I stay with you?"

"Yes. It is nice here. Isn't it. . .?"

"Yes." After a moment the lady spoke again. "May I ask you a question?"

"Yes," Nada replied.

"What will you do when you die?"

"I don't really know. . . I would like to think I'd go to the Summerplain," replied Nada.

The lady nodded and spoke again.

"And what would you do when you live?"

"Go on living I suppose . . . What else would there be to do?"

The lady looked down on herself.

"If you could choose between living and dying. . . which would you choose?"

"I would want to go back living. . . . But not much of my life is left for me now. . . ." Nada looked up at the sky. ". . . and . . well, I not sure if I'm ready for what's ahead. What if I didn't want to do either?"

The lady looked down at Nada.

"Well," she smiled. "That's your choice. Isn't it Nada?"

Etsamore

By Jean Schneider

Etsamore was late meeting the Princess of Midd. Being somewhat of a night owl, he was always just waking when others were tucking themselves neatly into bed. And tonight, of all nights, he had overslept.

Etsamore hurried outside and followed the little track to a prearranged meeting place. And there he found her, sitting upon a moonlit boulder, hugging her knees.

He approached slowly so as not to startle her. "Princess Catheryn, forgive my lateness," he said bowing low to the ground.

"Etsamore," she cried, running to him and throwing her arms around his neck. "Look," she said, motioning toward the Castle of Midd. "Do you see? All the knights are there, in the courtyard, feasting. No one was paying attention to me. I just walked right out the front gate."

Etsamore wished the Knights of Midd would do a better job watching over the princess, even if it meant that she had a harder time sneaking out of the castle. After all, it was their duty to protect her. Who knew what dangerous beasts could be lurking about?

"Maybe after story time, if you're hungry, you could go down there and get something to eat," the princess offered, for she had nothing to repay her friend for his time and kindness.

Etsamore gave her a toothy grin. "I just might do that."

The princess gave him a meaningful look and a wide smile. "See?"

Etsamore looked and then looked again. "My Princess, you are missing a front tooth!" He was shocked! Outraged! "Who has done this to you? Who has knocked this tooth from your mouth? Tell me, my lady. Give me the name and I will dispatch the knave at once."

Princess Catheryn giggled. "Etsamore! It fell out."

"Fell out!"

Catheryn was still giggling. "It just happens. Daddy says another one will grow in and replace it. Now, Etsamore, please tell me a story."

Etsamore was still trying to work out the tooth-thing, but he smiled and said, "I will do much more for I have brought you a gift."

The princess was delighted. "A gift? For me? What is it? What is it?"

Etsamore laughed. "Here is your gift," and he handed her an old leather bound book.

"Oh, Etsamore. Thank you!" The princess held it up to the moonlight and squinted at the title. "What does it say, Etsamore? What does it say?"

"A Long and Totally Complete History of Dragons; The Unabridged Version," Etsamore said, pointing proudly at the title, "And the reason for your gift is this: I am going to teach you to read."

"To read! Oh, but Etsamore, Daddy says it's not allowed for princesses to read. He says when I grow up, I will marry a fine prince and he will do all the reading and thinking for me. Won't that be wonderful!"

Etsamore cleared his throat, "Dandy."

"Now tell me a story, Etsamore. Tell me a story."

Etsamore glanced up at the star-studded sky. "Not tonight, my princess. The heavens speak; the hour is late. You must return to the castle before you are missed."

Catheryn groaned. "Must I leave so soon?"

"Yes, my princess. But tomorrow, I'll tell you a story."

"Do you promise?"

Etsamore crossed his heart.

"Should I give this back to you?" Catheryn asked, holding out the book to him.

Etsamore shook his head. "You keep it. For there may come a day when you will desire to do your own reading. . . your own thinking. And if that day comes, I want you to remember that I will always be here for you. To teach you. To be forever, your devoted subject." He bowed deeply.

The princess gave him a big hug and kiss on the cheek.

Etsamore smiled as he watched her pad softly down the path to the Castle of Midd. Barefeet, white nightie, and book tucked safely under her tiny arm. She was quite a lady, for a little girl, and he loved her dearly.

Etsamore waited until Catheryn was safely tucked away in her tower, asleep and most likely dreaming of dragons or faeries. Then he looked upon the castle where the Knights of Midd were still feasting. They had been oblivious to the princess's departure and return, and now it was time to pay them a little wake up call.

He stretched forth his magnificent wings and took to the skies. He circled the castle once. Then, with one fell swoop, and before anyone could let out so much as a yelp, he scooped up a knight and gobbled him down. As Etsamore rose to the heavens and headed home, he patted his stomach and chuckled to himself . . . for he had just eaten a Midd Knight snack.

Boeotia
By Jeff Wheeler

Missy Grove paced beside the upper crenellations of the royal palace of Silvandom. Glowering thunderheads crowded the skies across the horizon. The storm raided from the north, brought by fierce winds that threatened to shake loose every leaf in the Gardens of Anagassan below. The walkways were choked with debris, and the elven sweepers could not keep up with the wet and unseasonably hostile weather. Her arms were folded as she paced, digging into her chest, but she did not feel the cutting chill of the winds. Her emotions burned inside her, as well as the very flames she had learned long ago to master. Impatience. Worry. Fear. Loneliness. They all chased their tails inside her stomach, like so many cats unwilling to be penned in.

A hint of crimson and gold appeared on the horizon, wings flapping furiously against the storm. Relief surged and she dragged up the hem of her blue skirts, rushed to the tower stairwell and raced up the steps. She met Khiara coming down.

"You saw it, Missy?"

"I did. These winds must be overwhelming it. Come with me."

Khiara smiled awkwardly, wringing her hands, and followed Missy back up the parapet. Missy noticed the smudges of shadows under her friend's eyes, the slackness of her skin. She had been up for two days without rest, healing those suffering from Plague sores. As a disciple of Anagassan, she had a gift for healing that would have been the envy of any druid and shocked the priests of Seitherell. The Anagassan communion with the land was deeper than the mountain roots. They esteemed themselves the caretakers of the land. Missy had never been allowed to enter the Gardens, even though she could see them from the tower walls and had observed them from afar for eight years. Khiara was naturally quiet, so shy and reserved, and Missy had always felt it had more to do with the solitary rituals in the Garden than her feelings for a certain Elven prince.

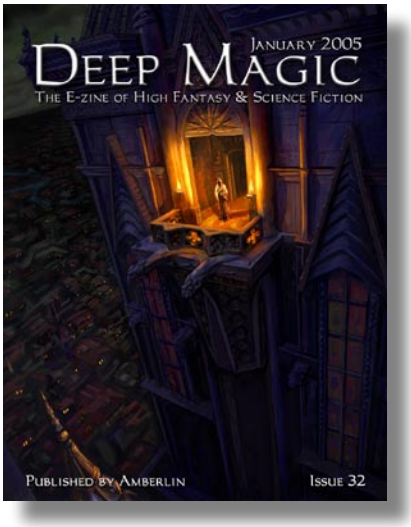
Tips of blue flame spread from her finger and devoured the parchment, consuming it into ash. Such words of blasphemy and self-doubt could never be shared openly.

After reaching the tower apex, she stepped onto the arched balcony and watched the little astrid struggle against the air currents. Its scaly body was as lean as any lizard. Instead of arms, it had wings that were easily the span of a falcon's. A sloping neck and beak allowed it to soar, and its little clawed talons clutched a brass cylinder—carrying the message she had been so anxious to receive.

Khiara joined her on the balcony, keeping back slightly. The wind whipped the elven girl's hair about her face. Missy gripped the edge of the balcony ledge, willing the astrid closer. As it flew near, it slowed and, swooping down with a practiced glide, extended the cylinder into Missy's outstretched hand. Then the astrid landed on the perch of the balcony rim and hissed and clucked, preening its scales and nearly flopping over the edge when a rushing gust of wind pummeled it. Khiara rescued the astrid and brought it into the annex, coaxing it with a bit of dried fruit until it started gobbling up the pieces and nearly snipping her fingers for being too

continued on page 22

Featured Artist
Eric Deschamps



Age: 29
Residence: Durham, North Carolina
Marital Status: Married
Children: One on the way
Hobbies: Currently learning guitar
Started Painting In: High school, seriously after college
Artist Most Inspired By: Jon Foster, Justin Sweet, Jeffrey Jones, George Pratt
Media You Work In: Digital and Acrylic paint
Schools Attended: Syracuse University
Other Training: Various workshops and figure drawing sessions
Where Your Work Has Been Published or Displayed: Magic: the Gathering, Dungeons and Dragons, Decipher trading card game, Fantasy Flight Games, Spectrum 11, Expose 2
Website URL: www.ericdeschamps.com

Q: How did you come to be an artist?
A: I had always been interested in drawing and crafts. My parents sent me to art camp in the summers and I loved it. We made puppets, drew, painted—I was a happy kid. When I was younger, most of my time was spent drawing out of my Spiderman and Silver Surfer comic books, creating my own Transformers and copying the Voltron lions.

When it was time for college, I knew the best chance I had for getting into a good school was through art. At the last minute, I pulled together all of my best drawings and hoped for the best.

I came out of college with a degree in Communication Design and a few illustration courses under my belt. I ended up working for NBC New York for three years creating television graphics and show openings (Today, NBC Nightly News, The Olympics). After a successful career in graphic design, I felt it

continued on next page

was time to move on. I left New York City and eventually ended up in North Carolina, where I began training myself to be an illustrator. I felt a need to be more creative in my career path and thought illustration would be a means for me to convey my ideas. This is what I have done for the past 3-4 years.

Q: How would you describe your work?
A: I like to think that my work suggests an underlying story for the viewer to explore. Currently my work is centered around discovering creatures and characters of other worlds, and alternate realities of our own planet.

Q: Where do you find your inspiration?
A: I am always looking for inspiration in nature such as insects, deep-sea creatures and primates. The music I am listening to can often set the tone for the work at hand.

Q: What inspired this piece (on our cover)? (Tell us its story...)
A: This piece came from looking at the work I had completed so far and realizing that architecture was something I had shied away from. I wanted something relatively gothic and ornate and hoped to depict a structure which was home to a reclusive, powerful and dark individual.

Q: What do you consider your influences?
A: Great stories, characters, and films from my childhood such as the Dark Crystal, Transformers, Secret of Nimh, the Muppets, and of course, the Star Wars trilogy. I also enjoyed games such as Phantasy Star and the Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time. I enjoy premises that go beyond the traditional wizards, dragons and warriors.

Q: What has been your greatest success in your artistic career?
A: Through attending conferences, meeting concept art greats such as Ian McCaig and Doug Chaing and having my work validated by them.

Q: What trends are you seeing in the Sci-Fi/Fantasy genre?
A: Much more digital painting.

Sivedie and the Stolen Sight

By Amy R. Butler

"Look. There he is, Reahe."

The slight woman straightened in her seat, trying to see through a clean spot in the window. "Where?"

"Walking down the street." The man threw back the last of his ale. "The only one that's sober."

"Ooh, yes."

He dropped a few coins on the table, standing as they spun. "Ready?"

"Absolutely."

"Don't forget to meet me tomorrow night."

The woman smiled as she stood up and nimbly stepped in front of her companion. "Sivedie, I promise to meet you tomorrow night."

* * *

The streets of Kenatos were mostly empty, the citizens of the city tucked into the comfort of their own houses or reveling in the music and madness of their local pub. The people on the streets were those who were already drunk, booted by the bar mistresses who knew they had no more coin. They slumped against houses, staggered in zig-zag paths, and slurred to themselves. Phygellus walked straight and purposefully, ignoring them.

She stopped, her gaze dragged from the road ahead of her to an alley at her right. What stood in the shadows, Reahe dared not guess, but she could see the faint outline of four legs and the bright spots of two yellow eyes.

He was passing a tavern that streamed light and music, not giving it any more mind than he had the other dozen he had already passed, when the door of the pub burst open and a woman collapsed into his arms. Startled, Phygellus wondered if she was hurt, until he realized that she was laughing.

"You ugly witch!"

A man emerged from the pub after the woman, He was reaching for her when Phygellus turned quickly, shielding her.

"Here now," Phygellus said softly. "There's no need for that."

"She's a dirty liar," the man said, puffing and snorting.

The girl giggled. "Not a liar. Maybe dirty."

The man tried to grab the woman again, but Phygellus picked her up and again dodged away.

"None of that," Phygellus said sharply. "Go on your way, man, before I must insist."

The man stood, hesitating. He tried one more half-hearted grab, but Phygellus kicked him in the shin, and he howled, jumping away and yelling curses.

continued on page 36

"Well . . . uh . . ." – one writer's first experience with pitching to an agent

By Ays Marin

This summer I was lucky enough to win a scholarship to the annual conference hosted by the Willamette Writers (an Oregon-based writers' organization that hobnobs around Portland). They gave me free range of their conference: three days' admission, attendance for any of the lectures or workshops, food, a pad of paper and a pen, and, the focus of this article: a chance to pitch to one of the attending agents sans charge.

At first I was thrilled. Wow. Me. Meeting with an agent. For ten minutes. I had just finished revising a stand-alone quest fantasy. Since short fiction comes to me with the ease of asking an elephant to step forward just a quarter of an inch, I've long been suffering from a dearth of publication credentials to impress the interns who read my queries. This was my opportunity. This was my chance to cut past that page-long middleman and grab a face-to-face opportunity to enchant an agent with the vivid spirit world that permeates every aspect of my heroine's native culture.

Then, I was nervous. Me. Meeting with an agent. For ten minutes. What would I say? Why would an agent be interested in me - a college student with zero life experience and frizzy hair? A real author doesn't look florid in black, is at least thirty, and has a striking couture.

Fortunately, I've always had a buoyant ego. Judging from the gratuitous authors' pictures stuck in the back covers of books, I have no reason to worry about my hair; at least I have some. I'm young, yes, but there have been younger. Anselm Audley, Christopher Paolini, and Mary Shelley were all published before they turned twenty. And, after all, if the agent didn't like my work, the worst she could say was "not for me."

My confidence lasted just long enough to make me sign up for that pitching session. I printed up a couple synopses, bravely ate some cookies, and tried out a few snappy catch-phrases to make my introduction. Then I panicked and ran off to hide behind the pitching practice table.

It was a good move. The guy who coached me dealt out solid advice. It was chiefly—and I was having a trifling amount of difficulty with this at the time—that agents are only human. Speak clearly and go slowly. It was fine, he told me, to admit that I was inexperienced at pitching, and a pitch is a lot like a query, in that you don't give a lot of detail unless the agent seems to want it.

"Sounds good," I told him. "I think I can do that."

I found out that the trays of cookies had been cleared while I was practicing, and consoled myself by doodling into my notebook until my pitching appointment approached. The time had come to find my agent.

Only then did I learn that half the pitching process involved being corralled into an assemblage of chairs, guarded by chatty volunteers; cordoned off from the sea of tables where an agent's placard rests, and hidden by either some twist of interior design or by the mass of writers springing up from their seats as their time of reckoning ends.

I found my agent near the back of the pack, and abandoned my initial idea of quoting the first few lines of my book. While *"'Hush,' said Mother, and Father went quiet."* looks good to me,

it seems a mite peculiar as a greeting.

My plan of action abandoned, I was impressed that the first word out of my mouth was neither "um…" nor "errr." I went with the generic, "Hello. My name is Ays Marin."

Then I sat down and introduced my book. "The Thinning Prison is a 100,000-word coming-of-age quest fantasy about a girl's journey into the spirit world as she tries to save her family from a magical plague."

We chatted. She asked questions. I gave details. She looked interested. I gave more details. I asked questions. She told me to send her a few chapters and a synopsis. Ten minutes passed. I left, almost dancing in glee. After the conference, I gave my manuscript one last air-brushing and sent off the first couple chapters and a synopsis. Afterward, I sat down and ambitiously started primping another project.

A month later, The Thinning Prison was rejected. Not with a form reply, *'I haven't read a single word of your work but it's not for me,'* but with a *'Send me something else.*' I'd call that a small success.

So I'd recommend that you try pitching, at least once. It costs more than a regular query (around fifteen dollars for a one-on-one pitching session, and that ignores conference fees), but many writers' conferences will waive the admission fee if you volunteer to help them set up or staff an event. It's easier to demand attention when you're sitting in front of an agent, rather than when you're just one brief piece of paper among hundreds. Keep stuffing those envelopes. I'm a devotee of the query myself, but they are more anonymous than a face-to-face meeting. If you get an opportunity to pitch, take it. It might be your thing. And, really, the worst an agent can tell you is "not for me."

Some tips to remember:

1. If you're giving your first pitch, be honest. Tell the agent that up front. It'll give you a little sympathy and maybe even a little leeway. If they're generous, they might even tell you what you did wrong.

2. Don't rush into things; you have time for some pleasantries. Approach the point in a friendly manner, and speak slowly and clearly.

3. Keep your pitch simple. You've bought 10 minutes of an agent's time. Not all of it has to be, or should be, a detailed synopsis. You can also ask questions about market trends, or what the agent would expect from an author they take on, or even if they hand-crocheted that really cool hat.

4. Anticipate questions. Common things you might be asked about are your personal experiences (especially if you're promoting a piece of non-fiction), why your work stands out from others of its genre, who influenced your writing, or even just more details about your plot and characters. I was asked why I thought I hadn't already been published, and what school I attend.

5. Don't denigrate your work just because you're nervous.

6. If you've memorized your book and can quote it at will, there's no reason not to share this with the agent—but be careful how you do so. Depending on what you write, no matter how well

written it is, you can come off sounding absurd. Quoting your Star Trek tie-in can come off as a little zany if you don't pick the right moment or the right line ('Data! Why are you and Captain Picard in the cargo hold with all the lights off? Data?')

7. Agents are only human. Even if you think you have substantive proof otherwise.

Good luck.

Silent Past
By Bill Snodgrass

"I'll not see my daughter go off with that lot," Haggas declared. "A daughter at that! No, I'll not see my daughter taking up with such as them. Not and be a happy man, I won't."

"Father, I'm not a child anymore," Seanis protested. "Three harvests have passed since I turned seventeen. Many here in Crooked Falls judge me an old maid, already."

"That is another matter, too!" Haggas replied. "You should have married that carpenter's boy when he asked you."

Seanis simply shook her head again. She knew her father was aware of her low regard for the one-time suitor, so she said nothing.

"Instead," Haggas continued, "you shun him, leave yourself an old maid, and now you set your sights to join those Wilderknights! I don't know what to do with you!"

"All the more reason to give me your blessing. If I am accepted, then you will have no more to worry about."

Haggas shook his head and conceded. Seanis felt sure that, in his heart, he knew she had already made up her mind. She knew it was his love for her that gave breath to his complaints, his concern for her that gave rise to his protests.

"Can I do nothing to sway your mind?"

Seanis shook her head. "I just wanted your blessing. I have thought this through, long and hard. I feel like I have to do something. I can't ignore my dream forever. I have to try something. I have to find some way to escape its haunting."

I just wanted your blessings. I have thought this through, long and hard. I feel like I have to do something. I can't ignore my dream forever.

"You could do plenty, without foolishly chasing off after the Wilderknights. You could marry, settle down and live a simple life. Like all the rest of the River Folk here in the Hinterlands."

Seanis unconsciously rolled her eyes, betraying her contempt for the alternative her father offered. "You'd have me ignore the fact that we live under constant threat from barbarians and in the very shadow of the Scourgelands? Not a season passes that…." She looked down then, giving her head a shake, and left the thought unexpressed.

She knew Haggas did not need to hear her words to understand what she meant. Though Headwaters Lake and the Vanishing River, which flowed from it, afforded the River Folk of the Hinterlands some slight protection from the barbarians of nearby Boeotia, raids were common, often ending in death.

"In my soul, I know doing something is better than nothing." Seanis looked at her father, hoping for a hint of agreement in his eyes. "Better to go out and meet the evil, rather than sit back and wait for it to come to our home."

Haggas's down-turned expression spoke his disagreement.

He is so stubborn, Seanis thought. *He refuses to admit the obvious. He knows that I can take care of myself…. He taught me himself how to shoot a bow.*

continued on page 49

Looking for a way to support Deep Magic? Tell your friends about our books! All of them can be purchased at Amazon.com and other online retailers by clicking on their covers.

Announcing two new Amberlin Books releases! *Silverkin*, sequel to *Landmoor*, is written by Jeff Wheeler and completes the Landmoor Duology. *Deeper Magic: The Second Collection* contains selected short stories from our second year of publication. Both books are available through Amazon.com and other online retailers. Click the cover images to order.

ISBN: 1586490060

ISBN: 1586490052

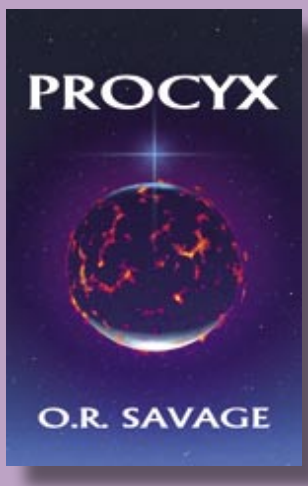
Silverkin

The anticipated sequel to Landmoor has finally arrived, continuing the adventures of Thealos Quickfellow.

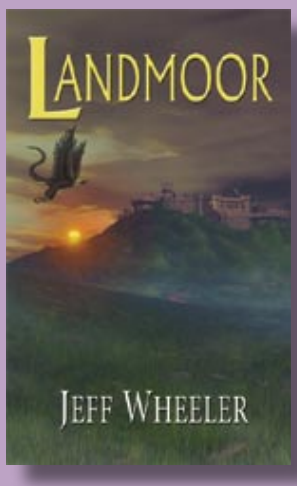
Deeper Magic:

The next collection of short stories compiled from the second year of Deep Magic.

Other publications released by Amberlin Books (click the covers to order).



ISBN: 1586490044



ISBN: 158649001X

ISBN: 1586490028

AMBERLIN BOOKS

Page Turners
Deep Magic Looks at Books

Be sure to check out the Book Reviews website, which contains all current and past book reviews in an easily searchable format. It also allows you to leave your own review or feedback for a book. All you have to do is register on our message boards and you can tell others what you think of the books. We hope you enjoy it, and we'll see you there!

Deep Magic Book Reviews website

Editor's Choice: Fantasy

Stardust
by Neil Gaiman and Charles Vess

It is the time of Victorian England, a time when industrialization is taking a stronger hold on the life and imagination of what will soon become the greatest empire in the world. Rationalism is beginning to rule. There are, however, still spots in the countryside where magic rules, and one of those places is the village of Wall, which sits just to the west of a high stone wall (whence the village gets its name). Through a small gap in the wall, one can sometimes glimpse strange and bizarre creatures, but the citizens of Wall never go through.

Once a year, though, there is a village fair set up in the meadow outside the wall. This is no ordinary fair, but rather an opportunity for the faerie from beyond the wall to hawk their wares. One year young Dunstan Thorn goes to the fair and through kindness and some bartering, manages to be gifted with his heart's desire. This turns out to be a night spent with a captured faerie. The next morning the fair leaves and Dunstan is left to spend the rest of his life wondering about that one-night encounter with his heart's desire.

Fast forward nearly 20 years. Dunstan is now happily married, but is raising that child from his encounter at the fair, a son named Tristran. Tristran is like most young men his age: awkward, but like his father before him, wanting to find his heart's desire. However, Tristran believes his heart's desire lies with the village beauty, and to win that beauty he rashly promises to bring her a shooting star that he sees landing on the other side of the wall.

And so begins Tristran's adventure in faerie where he will find true love and power.

Neil Gaiman has made a name for himself in the fantasy field (and won no small number of awards) by writing fantasies (including comics such as *Sandman* and *1602*) that are rich with references to history and folklore. Reading Gaiman makes a well-read person realize just how much he or she does not know. Like Frodo and Sam on their way to Mordor, the reader encounters relics of the past all throughout. *Stardust* and its land of faerie are rife with ideas taken wholesale from English and European folk and faerie tales. For example, on his journey to find the star, Tristran comes across a lion and a unicorn fighting it out, a clear reference to the old legend that is behind those two animals on the British crest.

But these constant 'stealings' from legend don't weaken, but strengthen, the story. Tristran walks through a world that is overflowing with a past, not some world that the author made up on the fly. In the capable hands of Gaiman, this results in more, not less, creativity, for Gaiman shows that a good author knows when to stand on the shoulders of giants to see further.

I've never met anyone who has ever found Gaiman hard to read. Even if you don't know a thing about folklore and your sense of history has the world starting sometime in the 20th century, you can still read Gaiman and enjoy him immensely. If anything, such a condition is not a shortcoming, but makes the stories feel rich, since all the 'borrowings' are new to you. Further, Gaiman's characters are fresh and real; in *Stardust*, which is billed as a fairy tale for adults, Gaiman is able to have his characters act like characters from a fairy tale (i.e., they act and speak like the stock characters you meet in a fairy tale), while at the same time they are full and alive and you feel strong empathy for them.

continued on next page

Rounding out this wonderful little book are the illustrations by Charles Vess. *Stardust* originally was an illustrated novel published in four parts by DC Comics' Vertigo imprint. Each page was accompanied by a beautiful illustration by Charles Vess. Later editions of the book have removed the illustrations, making it look more like a standard novel. DC still has the illustrated version in print in a single volume, however. The book stands quite well on its own, but I highly recommend the illustrated edition. The story and art were meant to be experienced together.

(Possible objectionable material: As is common with Gaiman, there is some explicit sex in the novel, including illustrations by Vess.)

Reviewed by Matthew Scott Winslow

Book Review: Fantasy

The Lives of Ghosts and Other Shades of Memory

By Loren W. Cooper

The Lives of Ghosts and Other Shades of Memory is a collection of eleven short stories. Each story is approximately ten pages in length, making this a slim book at only 130 pages overall. The stories vary between fantasy and science fiction, often combining elements of both.

I probably wasn't the right reader for this book; admittedly, I prefer not to have to fill in too many gaps with my own imagination, and I like description and a plot which isn't half implication. I found nearly all the stories in *Lives of Ghosts* to be overly vague in their telling. Also, many seem designed to spark emotion rather than tell a story as such, and I found that a little irritating.

There was also a problem with the distinction between good and evil in a few of these stories: characters who are obviously evil, and who have done nothing to gain the reader's sympathy, are portrayed positively, even as heroes. This was fairly minor, and it wasn't pervasive, but it detracted from the book's quality for me. Even if the protagonists weren't necessarily evil, they were often unsympathetic nonetheless.

The writing was generally quite good; poetic descriptions come off nicely, atmosphere is successfully created, and the prose itself is far more clear than the stories it tells. A couple of the pieces stood out for me as great ones, namely the title story ("The Lives of Ghosts") and "Heart's Reach".

A few examples of stories that best represent the collection's content:

In "Agamemnon at Aulis", a sentient ship whose consciousness is spread throughout an asteroid belt watches a world it terraformed come under attack from an alien race known only as The Enemy. The world has been inhabited by the Federation since its shaping, and the sentient ship *Agamemnon* is contacted to help ferry refugees off-world. He refuses, and watches as the planet is conquered. This story was really only constructed to convey one emotion -- the ship's sorrow at never being able to enjoy his planet, with one variation thereupon at the end. It didn't work for me.

"Heart's Reach" is told from the viewpoint of a half-man, half-wolf warrior who has been given as a gift to Leonidas, the lord of a fortress known as Heart's Reach. At first it seems as though he will be a loyal retainer of Leonidas, but he has his own agenda. The world in this story is barely hinted at, but my mind was able to fill in enough of the gaps to make it a fascinating one, and this story's emotions were genuinely resonant with me. I thought it was probably the strongest piece in the collection.

"The Fix" was quite possibly my least favorite story. It revolved around a conflict that was never explained, had no named characters, and was generally extremely vague while at the same time having a despicable monster for a protagonist.

In the end, I think that there are many who will find this collection more enjoyable than I did, and hopefully find more in it to enjoy.

(Possible objectionable content: Some mild sensuality and mild but occasionally disturbing violence.)

Reviewed by Sean T.M. Stiennon

continued on next page

Book Review: Fantasy

The Golden Compass (aka, The Northern Lights)

by Philip Pullman

The world of little Lyra Belacqua is a variation of our own. At first glance, it seems we are at Oxford University in England back in the early 1900s. But details quickly reveal that Lyra is on a different world entirely. It is a world of zeppelins and gyptians and an enigmatic substance called Dust. And it is a world where every human being has an alter-ego that takes the form of an animal, called a daemon. Children's daemons can assume the form of any creature. As adults, daemons remain in a true form, a form that reveals something of the person's individuality.

Young Lyra is an urchin being raised in the austere Jordan College of Oxford. Instead of studying, she would rather scramble about the heights and depths with her streetwise friends. Sparks fly between her and her uncle, Lord Asriel, who infrequently visits the college with the results of his strange experiments. And her life is turned upsidedown after her best friend Roger is abducted by the Gobblers, a sinister group who kidnap wayward children and bring them to the far north for experiments with Dust.

Lyra joins the gyptians as they seek to rescue the lost children of England and is hunted ruthlessly by the head of the Gobblers, Mrs Coulter, a beautiful woman with a golden monkey daemon. With the help of a zeppelin pilot, an armored bear, and the gyptians, Lyra manages to rescue her friend from the prison camp for children and learn about her uncle's experiments and Mrs Coulter's ambitions. For Dust reveals many secrets, including the existence of other worlds – worlds that Lyra is destined to wander.

The Golden Compass is a rich and darkly written book suitable for children and adults. The author deftly reveals the setting as part of the action and builds the tension and threats to Lyra to the end of the novel. This is book one of a trilogy called *His Dark Materials* (a nod to Milton's *Paradise Lost*). The beginning and the ending are the most fast-paced and interesting, and the story does slow down in the middle as Lyra travels with the gyptians northward. I found the story entertaining, thought-provoking, and unpredictable. By the time I reached the climax, Lyra and her daemon Pantalaimon were real people to me, and the world seemed as genuine as our own.

(Possible objectionable material: none)

Reviewed by Jeff Wheeler

continued on next page

continued from page 10

slow.

Missy twisted the end of the cylinder, unfastened it, and thumped out the note. She hastened to unravel it.

Dearest,

The fell winds have brought the Boeotians as I feared. They grow bolder in the daylight now. At night, they have taken to pounding drums which we can hear from across the shore. The citizens are frightened that a host is coming, such as has never smitten our walls. It has been many years since they have tried to raze the City. How will they cross the waters? How will they breach the walls? We have the higher ground. We have a defensible position. We have withstood the Siege of the Plague for eight years and our stores run low. Do they know this or only suppose? Have they reckoned somehow that the Plague has ended and seek to destroy us before help can arrive? Too many questions, Dearest. We have been cut off too long and have grown deaf. Why else would they choose to strike us now, at our weakest moment? The Empress must be stirring, if she lives still. They say she has the patience to dig a well with a needle.

I do not seek to worry you without cause. Your last letter brought comfort to me. To know you are well gives me solace. The Prince's offer to send soldiers to relieve a siege is gratefully accepted. Please tell him that we are in his debt. Our need is not dire yet. But I fear these storms are not as natural as they seem. Something drives the winds. It is as if the Empress has unstoppered all the foul winds of her domain on us.

Dearest, I implore you to remain in Silvandom. We have wizards aplenty in the City. If the Boeotians attack us, then we will fight. We can do no less than every previous generation has done in our place. I have beseeched the King of Wayland to send aid. I pray to Seitherell that he will honor my request. The dwarves of Alkire have sequestered themselves beneath the mountains. I do not even know if they have received my messages.

Send word when you can. It comforts me to see your words. It reminds me of years I took for granted. Years wasted in such an exile. I remember watching you scribe the Malleus Malecar. The ledgers of the temple show you were paid 115 pents for your labor. I keep it in my study, that I may stroke the words you have written when I cannot stroke the hands that wrote them. I see you in my mind's eye as you arrived that day so long ago. I fear you will find me too old and grizzled now. The Temple is done. How I hate it. So many have died because of the Plague. So many deaths. I do not understand why Seitherell allows it to happen still. Perhaps he is testing us, proving our devotion to his ways. Or perhaps he is ashamed of us still for all the blood of our people that have been slaughtered.

Write to me, Dearest.
With all my heart and affection,
B

Missy stared at the page for a moment, savoring the words. She read it again, memorizing it, and then once more to be sure before her mind repeated the words. *Pyricanthas. Sericanthas. Thas.* Tips of blue flame spread from her finger and devoured the parchment, consuming it into ash. Such words of blasphemy and self-doubt could never be shared openly. He took such a risk putting them down at all. There were priests who would kill the Arch-Rike for such unguarded words. If he was careless with his quill, was he equally so with his tongue?

She looked up and saw Khiara studying her.

"You do not weep any more when you read his messages," Khiara said, stroking the astrid's sinewy neck.

"I haven't wept in a long time." She twisted the cap of the cylinder back in place. "Weeping makes time go slower, I've discovered. It gains you nothing."

Khiara shrugged. "So you say, sister. But I saw you pacing the walls. You miss him still. How is he?"

Missy rose and brushed her lap. "He is worried. And that is unusual for him. Would you find Prince Nasla and beg him hurry? I must depart for Kenatos at once."

"He asked you to stay behind."

"I will not remain cloistered here when the man I love is in danger. Not when I have the power to aid him. Please, Khiara. Find the prince and tell him we must leave. I must return to Kenatos."

Khiara calmly got to her feet, still stroking the astrid. "I won't gainsay you then, sister."

And it was what she left unsaid that told Missy that Khiara would have done the same for Prince Nasla.

Men were such fools.

* * *

As Missy returned to the Prince's manor house, she pondered what she would write in reply. Words became more difficult as the years passed. They knew each other's minds after so many years of sharing them. Every crevice of their souls had been explored. But all the written words paled against the thoughts of reunion. Eight years of solitude and loneliness. Eight years.

"Missy."

The intruder's voice was husky, his eyes glowing in the darkened room.

The shock of being startled nearly made her hurl him away with a spell. Fyündular were so quiet. It took all her self-control to keep from dashing him to pieces, to summon the flames. Her insides coiled like knots.

"Who are you?" she whispered.

The Finder had been sitting in a plush chair and rose, lanky and confident. Shadows painted his features as he bent over a wrought-iron pedestal and picked up a figurine of an elven koruscible. He set it down again.

"You don't recognize me, Missy?" He snorted.

Pin!

Her heart nearly burst with longing. Tears long bottled up stung her lashes. Waving her hand, she summoned the flames again and lit the candles and lamps throughout the room. The sudden effusion of light made him wince and squint. But it was him, her little brother, a man grown. He was taller than father had been, with a trimmed beard and a crooked nose that had obviously been broken more than once. His lanky frame wore the leathers well, the shoulder seams split and dirty, the cuffs and bracers scarred. She sensed a pulsing magic coming from his hand and saw the ring she had given him years ago on his finger. Daggers were belted to his waist, the pommels no longer gleaming but cankered with blood.

"You look as if you wished I were dead."

"No!" she said, rushing forward and gripping him in a hug. "By Seitherell, no! Pin, look at you. Look at you! You're a man now."

"That surprises you?"

"I'm pleased, Pin. Truly, I am. How did you get here? The gates of Silvandom are still closed. There are guards around the manor…"

A smirk twisted across his mouth. "I know, Missy. It takes more than those to stop a Finder. I'm not Pin any more. My Finder name is Pindron."

"Where have you been all these years? Were you with Kinmon the whole time?"

"No, I left him after he taught me. I've been everywhere, Missy. Alkire, Wayland, Stonehollow…Havenrook. But I kept coming back to Kenatos to see if the gates would open again."

"Do you know about the Boeotians then? Tell me!"

"I know of them. That's why I came, Missy." He looked her in the eye, gritting his teeth. "I need your help."

She licked her lips. "I'm going back to Kenatos, Pin. I won't let the Boeotians destroy it."

He shook his head, looking down at the table stand again. "No, that's not what I mean. I need your help with something else. Missy, they'll kill her. She's unprotected, she can't…she can't defend herself. They are coming around the lake now, trying to learn more about our lands. Some of them were going to cut down her tree. I…I killed them. Missy, you have to help me protect her."

Her stomach went cold. "What have you done, Pin?"

"My name is Pindron!" he said, face twisting with anger. "I'm not that clumsy little brother you always hated. Do you think it was easy for me to come here? To beg your help? Missy, do you?"

"The Dryad, isn't it?" Missy said, closing her eyes. "What have you done?"

"I love her, Missy. I swore I'd protect her. I can stop keebuls and norricks and spearlings. But an army? More keep coming. Most of the Boeotians want the big oak for firewood, and she's in the little one. There are druid memories in them both. So much we can learn from them. She's been teaching me about the land. About the history. About what it was like before Kenatos was even here. Before the gods. Before the world was written about. These memories will be lost. Tales made into kindling. Missy—I promised her I'd save her."

Emotions thundered inside her. She had not seen her brother for eight years. All those years she had worried about him, wondering if he'd died. There had been no letters from him. Only Kinmon had written saying he'd taken the boy under his wing for a while but confessing he did not think Pin had the mettle to be a Finder.

"What do you want me to do?" Missy asked, rubbing her eyes. "I was going back to Kenatos with the Prince's army to try and save the island."

"They have walls. They have wizards. *Shadows*, Missy, they have enough! Enough protection. She has none. Only me."

"She's not…she's not human. Of course she wants you to protect her. She…"

"You know nothing of that," Pin said venomously. "You've buried your face in books, Missy. I've seen the world. You've been sheltered too long." He advanced on her, making her wary. "Please, Missy. The Boeotians fear magic. They fear the wizards. No one else will help me. The army of Wayland is coming, but they will not arrive for a fortnight or more. I need you until then. Please. Please, Missy. Help me."

She closed her eyes.

"I'm needed in Kenatos too," she said, clenching her fists.

His lips quivered. "I won't beg, Missy." He swallowed, rubbing his eyes. "But can you not,

for once, choose your family?"

"That's not fair."

"And being born without the curse in my blood is fair? If I could summon the flames, if I had the demon blood…"

"Hush, Pin!"

He lowered his voice. "If I had it myself, I wouldn't need you. I've met others in my travels like you. They are hiding in caves, delving into woodlands, hiding their blood from those who are afflicted with the Plague. Even now you are sheltered by the Arch-Rike, even here in Silvandom. Imagine being helpless. Truly helpless."

"I know that feeling, Pindron." Her heart nearly burst with pain. "I feel it every day that I am trapped here away from the man whom I love. Sometimes there are things that are more important. Causes that must be sheltered, no matter how we feel about it. There are…"

"No," he said, jerking his hand in a slashing motion. "You've always blamed your failings on someone or something else. 'I've books to write.' 'The Arch-Rike is expecting it next week.' What does it matter? What do books truly matter? Life is people, Missy. It's always about people."

Missy sensed him before she saw him. It was always like that with Ty.

"Pin?"

He entered the room, almost as tall as his brother and wider across the shoulders. His red hair was curled and wavy, down to his shoulders.

"Pin!"

Ty rushed across the room and embraced his brother. He was sixteen now but looked more like he was twenty. The joy on his face wrung tears from Missy's eyes. The clenching hug lasted a long time. Tyrus glanced back at Missy, his thoughts spattering against her mind. *Why didn't you tell me he was here?*

"It's been years, Pin. How are you? Where have you been? Look at you. Have the Finders no bath houses? You smell like a gutted rabbit lying in the sun too long."

"And you smell like primroses. What are you now, a gardener?"

Ty laughed heartily. "By Seitherell, I've missed you. Look at those blades. Missy will only let me train with the royal guards but they never let you hurt them. You're a Finder then. Look at you. And a distinguished beard. It makes you look older. What is your Finder name?"

"Pindron."

"I like it. Missy still calls me Ty, even though she knows I hate it. In Silvandom, I am Tyrus the Good Looking. And she's called Missy the Despondent. Pindron Grove. What brings you to us? How long can you stay?"

Pin's eyes glared at her. "I was just leaving."

Missy bit her lip. "Don't go."

Ty looked between them, the cheer dimming in his eyes. "What is it?"

"I came here for help, Tyrus. I wasted a journey."

Ty gripped his brother's arm. "I'll help you. What is your need? I'll see it done."

"Sorry, lad. It's her help I need. If only you were older."

"I am old enough!" Ty said.

Missy took a step closer. "I will go. I will do what I can."

"Go where?" Ty asked. "Kenatos?"

Pin looked doubting. "You will?"

"Go where?" Ty repeated.

"If we leave Silvandom, we cannot return. The gates will be barred to us. But we have been apart for too long. We are family. And that has always been more important to me."

"Where?" Ty nearly screamed.

Pin's mouth twitched into a smile. "Do you remember the Dryad oak? The place we waited for Kinmon the day we learned the Plague was upon us?"

Ty's face became deadly serious. "I can bring us there."

"You have a good memory then. It will take a week to ride there, maybe more depending on the Boeotians. If we…"

"No," Ty said, interrupting. "I can bring us there right now."

Missy looked at her brother in shock. "What are you talking about?"

"I know how to create a Rift. I've been practicing."

"You can what? I've never even heard of that. What are you talking about?"

Ty smiled mischievously. "It's in your book, Missy. The book you stole. The concept was there. The theory was there." He shrugged. "I've been leaving Silvandom for the last few months. I cannot open a Rift to Kenatos. There are wizard wards that protect the city. But the Dryad oak is real. I know I can take us there."

Pin clamped his hand on Tyrus' shoulder. "Take us now."

"No," Missy said, intervening. "Not yet. We need to prepare first."

* * *

Missy cradled the astrid in her arms and watched Ty with a growing sense of dread. His face pinched with concentration, the tendons on his hands protruding like bones, his fingers hooked like talons. He frowned, burrowing deeper into himself and into the magic. She could feel it radiating through him, rippling just beneath the surface. He was like a lake, some vast bowl of magic that he alone knew the depths of. It frightened her how deep he could go into himself, how connected he was with the source of his power. Pin watched with fascination, staring at the space on the wall where Ty had said the Rift would appear.

Ty let out a little groan, which he quickly choked back. She sensed what he was doing. His elbows dug against his ribs, his hands slightly apart, glowing blue with flame. The colors danced across his palms, over his hooked fingers. Finally, the glow separated from his hands completely, dancing in the air, a wisp of a thing—yet it was so raw with power, it made gooseflesh prickle Missy's arms. She stared at it, seeing its true essence, seeing the intricacies of the spell. How was Tyrus' mind able to conjure such a thing? The blue stain of fire floated to the wall.

"*Shadows*," Pin murmured, awestruck.

The stain trembled, as if it would gutter out, but Tyrus clenched harder, grinding his teeth, digging into himself to control it. It floated, wandering like a dust mote, before bumping into the wall.

A blinding flash of light.

Missy shielded her face. When she recovered, she could see through the pinpricks of stabbing light to the Rift. The edges were like burning parchment, but it was a window of sorts. The smell of outside struck her. Leaves blew into the manor room, followed by spattering raindrops. Two oak trees loomed through it, and they were close enough to reach out and feel the bark.

"Hurry," Ty gasped.

Pin needed no further prodding. He lunged through the Rift, shuffling sideways to fit. Missy looked at Tyrus and saw the sweat streaking down from his temples, his quivering jaw. She pulled the astrid tighter against her chest and stepped through after Pin. The grassland was moist with mud. It yielded beneath her boots. She was glad she'd insisted they not react impulsively, had taken time to prepare for the journey by changing clothes, getting sturdy boots and weather cloaks. She stared back through the Rift, watching Tyrus heave against the magic. She bit her lip, conflicted by the pain she saw on his face.

Tyrus bent over double and the Rift suddenly grew, expanding to twice its size. He straightened, walked through, and it seized shut behind him as a pop of thunder boomed overhead.

Rain slashed down at the trees, the winds bucking fiercely.

Tyrus collapsed in the mud.

"Ty!" Pin shouted, rushing to him. Missy crouched, feeling his wrist. His skin was cold to her touch. Worry knifed her ribs. He had exerted himself too much, had spent too much of the flame. After jerking the cowl of his cloak off, she felt his forehead. Like ice.

"What's the matter?" Pin asked, pulling him around. "Is he dead?"

Missy touched his pulse and felt his hammering heart.

"Ty?" Missy said, brushing his cheek. "Ty, wake up!"

"I didn't know," Pin said, staring at his brother in horror. "It hurts you to use the magic?"

"Yes. He used too much of it. Ty, wake up. Help me rouse him, Pin."

Tyrus' eyes blinked open. He looked around, startled. "Did I faint?"

Relief spasmed in her heart. She clutched the edge of his cloak. "What have I warned you of, Ty? What have I said about using too much?"

He squirmed free, brushing the mud from his face. "I'm fine, Missy. By Seitherell, what is that? Do you feel it?"

"Feel what?"

He got to his feet shakily, gripping Pin's arm to do so. He looked north towards Kenatos. "Don't you feel it, Missy?"

She did. Her panic for Ty had blinded her to it for a moment, but it was there. She sensed the use of magic, a powerful magic, a giant magic, to the north. It was enormous, and it disguised itself in the storm. The clouds, the rain, the coughing thunder masked it. It was bigger than the skies.

"What is it?" Pin asked as the wind shook the trees, spattering them with acorns.

Ty let go of Pin's arm and took a few steps toward it. "I don't know how to describe it. But it's magic. This storm isn't natural. The winds here are never this fierce. The magic is…it's sucking in all the weather around. How is it doing it though? It's a grain bag that's been split and all the seeds are rushing out through the little rip. Every cloud in every land is being drawn there. Over there." He pointed north. "It's a thing. A token. Something. It channels things. Everything." He shook his head. I'm not making sense."

"What do you mean?" Pin asked. "The weather is broken?"

"Yes," Missy said, lifting the cowl of her cloak to shield her face from the rain. The wind tugged at her, threatening to knock her down. The astrid squirmed, offering a mewling, hissing sound. But she could feel it, and the enormity staggered her. "It's magic, Pin. I can feel it in the air. Not all the wizards of Kenatos could summon this much power. It's pulling in the winds. I can feel its….its heat. It's like a cauldron of soup that has brought to a boil. You can feel the heat of it when you put your hand over it. It's like the earth is boiling with magic, and it's drawing

other magics to it."

"It is the *kyprios*."

Her voice was almost a whisper.

Missy and the others turned, barely able to discern the dryad's skin from the scarred bark of the oak.

"You're alive," Pin said with a gasp, rushing to her, clenching her in a shielding hug. She looked so small in his arms, a thing of bark-brown skin, green glowing eyes, a being of ivy and mushrooms and grass. Missy sensed her presence, a creature more than woman. The dryad's fingers entwined in Pin's shirt.

"What is the *kyprios*?" Missy asked her, stroking the astrid's leathery neck.

"It has come here before," the dryad whispered. "Years past, many Plagues ago. Those of the north brought it to destroy Kenatos. The druids forbade them to use it and they retreated back to their lands. It will destroy us all."

"But what is it?" Ty asked, rubbing his arms, his face pinched with fatigue.

"It is the *kyprios*."

"But what does that mean?"

"It means what it means. It is the *kyprios*."

Missy studied her glowing eyes. How old was she, in dryad terms? It sounded like she was repeating a tale, instead of speaking from memories that were her own. Perhaps one of the druids who had been alive during that time had planted his memories into her oak. Her reasoning was as sophisticated as an eight-year-old's.

The wind gusted more fiercely, making Missy stagger against its rush. Acorns pelted them. Thunder boomed in the boiling skies. Wet hair clung to her forehead and she wiped it back from her face.

"I'm not leaving you," Pin said suddenly, squeezing her shoulders. The dryad shook her head, whispering again.

"What is it?" Missy asked.

Pin's face turned into a snarl. "I'm staying here. If you die, then I will die with you."

"For Seitherell's sake, what is it?"

"They are coming. She can feel them coming. The roots over other trees speak to her. Warning her they're coming."

"Who? The Boeotians?"

Pin nodded, his face grief-stricken.

Missy wrestled in herself. She sensed the power of the kyprios looming over her, drawing her towards it. It beckoned seductively, teasing her with the enormousness of its power. What would it be like to have that power in her hands? The power to level a kingdom with winds and storm and surge?

"It doesn't make sense," Ty said, brushing her elbow to get her attention. "If the Boeotians have had it all along, why wait until now to use it? Can you sense the danger, Missy? It will destroy everyone, even the Boeotians. Once the winds build to a fury, they won't be able to control them. Why are they using it?"

"I don't know. Maybe they do not understand the magic. Maybe it has been lost or forgotten until now. No one knows the ways of the Empress. Maybe there is no Empress."

Ty wiped his face. "There is an Empress, Missy. I'm sure of it. All the stories told of her—of her Ruling Stone and the Lost Dragons? What do we do about the oak, Missy?"

She knew what his true question was. If they stayed to protect the dryad oak, the kyprios

would build to its full power and perhaps destroy everything, even the tree. Yet what good could they do against an army of tribesmen? What could the three of them really do?

Ty looked her in the eye. "We stop it, Missy. You know we must."

"How?"

"I don't know. The same way we deal with other magics. When we see them work, we know how they work. Maybe that is how the druids did it. Maybe the druid who forbade it was one of us."

"Are you both abandoning me?" Pin accused, shoving Tyrus hard. "You cannot leave me here alone. Didn't you hear her, they are coming!"

A hot splash of fury doused Missy. "You haven't changed at all, Pin. Can you not see that there are things at work here bigger than us all? The Boeotians are using magic here and if we don't stop it, no little spell will protect this tree. Don't you feel these winds? They're unnatural. I doubt the oak's roots are deep enough to withstand them. Ty and I can help. If we face this threat together, we may stop the enemy advance. Then they will leave. Wayland's army is coming, you said it yourself. The elven army is coming. If we…"

"Why is it always like this?" Pindron roared. "Why is it something else instead of your family? If Seitherell is so powerful, let the Arch-Rike contend with the kyprios. They drove us from the city and you'd risk your life to save them? I don't understand you, Missy. I never have. Father would have…"

"You never knew Father! You were a little boy, Pin. He worked. And he worked. He did everything in his power to provide for us, to see that we had biscuits and milk. He scribed books and letters and ledgers and anything he could earn a pent for. And he did it for us, for his family. You've never worked a day in your life so I doubt you'd understand it. You've become everything he wasn't—a selfish, lazy man."

Pin's eyes glowed orange. "You're wrong, Missy. I'm a Finder. And I worked hard to become one. Go then. Both of you. You are not my family. You are not my blood. Go."

Missy shut her eyes, trembling with rage. When she opened them again, she took a step forward. "The only way to lose me, Pin, is to use that knife at your belt and cut out my heart. I haven't loved you all these years to be disavowed now. No, Pindron Grove. We are not finished. You've always seen me through your own eyes, the eyes of your selfishness. What other reason to scribe so many books? Not to earn pents to pay for your shelter, your clothes, your baubles, your friends. I gave up comforts in Kenatos because of what they would do to you. I will not stand aside and watch someone murder you. I love you too dearly, despite how little you deserve it!"

Something changed in him. She watched the fierceness drain from his countenance. Rain soaked his hair and beard. He stood, quivering, near the oak. The dryad studied him, glowing green eyes full of expectation.

Pin muttered something as thunder boomed overhead, the sky splitting with searing combs of lightning.

Missy stepped close enough to see the rain water dripping from his nose.

"You've never said it. All these years and you've never once said it. Until now."

"That I loved you?" She hooked the back of his neck with her hand and pulled his forehead against hers. "Hear me now, Pindron. You are my family. You are my blood. I will never stop loving you, even when it pains me to do so. I never admitted loving anyone until eight years ago. I loved mother and father and they died. I could hardly bear the ache of it. The loneliness. And you left before I could form the words to you."

"It's getting stronger," Ty warned. "Missy!"

She looked into Pin's eyes, saw the grief, the uncertainty, and finally—so many years overdue—acceptance. He had been raised without a mother. The scars of it were in his eyes, despite his rugged leather tunic, his blood-spattered knives.

Missy sensed the power building. "We don't have much time." She hefted the astrid and brought its tiny beak near her face. Using her magic, she ensorcelled it. Her mind brushed against its. There would be only a few commands it would be able to communicate or obey, so she chose them well. *Find the Arch-Rike. The kyprios. The kyprios.*

She released the creature to the skies and watched the wind surge against its leathery wings. It flapped furiously, through the knife-edged rain, towards the island of Kenatos.

Missy saw the satisfaction in Tyrus' eyes. He gave her a subtle nod. Turning back to the dryad, she wove another spell. Closing her eyes, she pulled the strings of magic together, tossing them out and sweeping them in, crisscrossing them around in her mind. When she pulled the threads together, the stand of oak trees vanished.

"She'll be safe for a few hours at least, Pindron. Let us see how strong the kyprios truly is."

* * *

The drums were as deafening as the thunder. Shrieking winds filled the camp with howls. Mud churned with tramped prairie grasses, gray and oozing. Tall tents made of hide, wrapped around spear poles, transfixed with skulls. Horses screamed and reared, battling their riders. But the drums droned on, growing louder and louder, freakish and frenzied. Some of the barbarians were bathed in blood. Some wore glowing torques that made their skin harden like stone. Spears and curve-bladed swords were all held aloft, amidst the lashing tongues of lightning that forked the sky. The storm boiled the waves of the lake and terrible surges crashed against the island of Kenatos. A shimmering glow shielded the city proper, and Missy could feel the power of its wizards even from the opposite shore. They were preparing for an onslaught of some kind, the shape of which would not be known. Perhaps the astrid would be unable to penetrate the flickering dome that enclosed the city like a bubble.

"There are no boats," Ty whispered at her ear.

The three siblings were all invisible, but lashed together with magic to keep from butting into each other.

It was true. No siege engines, no boats. Only an army of marauding warriors and mounted horsemen. Huge drums with taut skin lids were aligned by the lakefront. Huge men holding club-like batons beat against them in some savage rhythm. The hair on the nape of Missy's neck stood on end. The very air had a sickish flavor, a hint of rot amidst the lake-water.

"Look," Pindron whispered. "By the shore. Those look like druids, but I've never seen that mark before."

He was right. Twelve druids stood by the shore, heads covered with cowls of black while the rest of their garments were brown. They stood mingled with the warriors, barely discernable in the gloom.

"It's over here, Missy." Ty nudged her to follow him towards one of the smaller tents. The main tent was a massive pavilion, guarded and surrounded by over a hundred warriors. But a smaller tent nearby was only guarded by a few. The magic of the kyprios emanated sourly from that smaller tent.

"How are we going to get through those Boeotians?" Pindron asked. "They guard the front."

"The smaller tent, Pindron. The other is a decoy," Missy said. Her heart battled inside her chest with fear. They had walked unmolested through an enemy army, full of warriors who hated everything about Kenatos and its wizards. She had brought her brothers into the heart of its madness and hate. If anything were to happen to either of them, she would regret it all her days.

Ty reached for and squeezed her hand. There was strength in his grip that startled her, as if he said with his touch, *We are older now. You need not protect us any longer.*

The wind shook the tent poles, whipping streamers of cloth and rope tied with shards, but the stakes were hammered in deep.

Someone was in the tent. Someone with their blood.

Missy sensed him and knew he sensed her as well. It was a mutual awareness, a shared breath, a common scent. Her courage began to melt, but she steeled it.

"Quickly now. Pindron, slit the side of the tent. I'll go in first, but I want you to follow me. Ty, keep our exit clear. Watch those druids. They are of the Black. Go!"

A dozen spells whirred through her mind, like children's tops spinning on tabletops during Sotanek. The first, a spell to silence the area, to prevent noise from leaving the confines of the tent and to prevent Pin from making a sound as he cut it. He did, swiftly, and a jagged line appeared in the whipping walls of the tent.

Missy stepped inside, elbows close against her body, fingers talon-like as she prepared to unleash her powers. *Pyricanthas. Sericanthas. Thas. Pyricanthas. Sericanthas. Thas.* Blue flames danced across her fingertips, invoked by the ancient magic that was the bloodright of all her people.

The druid inside the tent had flames in his hands as well.

The callous intensity of his eyes chilled her. He wore the black of his brotherhood, with blue and silver paint above his right eye and down his right cheek. Tattered sleeves exposed arms rich with the intricacy of veins and tattoos. Bracelets adorned his wrists and forearms, and fingerless gloves shielded burn scars, but the ribbons of half-healed flesh had traveled up his fingertips and up his arms. The kyprios seethed with power, emanating from an ear-shaped cockleshell that hung from his neck on a coil of gold. She saw it bounce against his chest. Its magic nearly blinded her with its intensity.

A twitch of his painted eyebrow and her invisibility unraveled.

She didn't wait for his next spell.

Flames leapt from her fingers and surged into him as she darted to the side. The fire would have scorched another man, but being of the same blood, he merely let it splash over him and attacked her in return. His hands hooked and arced and she felt the pull of druid magic in the earth, sucking at her legs and feet, trying to swallow her, to slow her down.

Holding out her palm, she unleashed a charge of invisible power, willing it into a sphere, and sent it hurling into the druid's stomach. She levitated herself off the ground, breaking connection with the druid magic clawing at her, and summoned another ball.

"*Inshakasi! Inshaka redu!*" the druid shouted. He raised his arms and the tent ropes unraveled around the stakes, coiling and flailing like serpents, and the pavilion cover rushed up into the turbulent skies, tossed like a flag.

He drew more of the power of the kyprios into himself, drawing in the storm's magic, to suffuse the cockleshell with winds and storm and raging lightning. It was nearly brimming with power. Missy could sense it—could sense that Ty was aware of it too.

He stood nearby, staring at the blue-eyed druid. *He'll destroy us all!*

Ty's hand shot out, summoning the kyprios, but it seemed to weigh more than a horse. She

could feel the tendrils of magic around it, but they could not budge it. The kyprios lashed back at him, knocking Ty from his feet as if a giant had swatted him.

Fear gushed inside Missy. It was powerful!

The druid's eyes were fiery with determination. He wove his hands and the shell of silence shattered. "*Inshaka redu!*" he screamed, drawing eyes to them. Boeotians roared when they saw Missy floating there, a naked apparition of wizardry in their midst. She did not have much time.

Pain.

The force of the spear shook her, sending her back to the earth. It was pain like nothing she'd felt before, worming through her body and sucking her breath away. She sensed other weapons hurtling at her and brought up a defensive spell that struck back, deflecting the arrows, stones, and spears. Blood throbbed from her back and she looked at the shaft protruding from her. Her mind went black with worry and anger and she summoned the flame inside her to a white-hot heat. The shaft incinerated, the spearhead melting away from her, the wound sizzling. Her skin was blistered and puckered. How long before she bled to death? Her thoughts unraveled with panic, darting across her mind like frantic butterflies.

Ty was on his feet again, his face purple with a bruise, and he sent ribbons of heat at the druid, to no effect. The kyprios moaned with its load. A blot of black appeared in the sky as the clouds swirled. Missy's ears felt strange. Tent ropes snapped and canvas whipped. Horses screamed.

A finger of death started down from the clouds, a swirling mass of storm, as if Seitherell himself were reaching down to squash the Boeotian army. Missy knew that if the cone of winds reached them, they would all be killed.

"I can't stop it!" Ty shouted, and she could feel him working with the magic in his mind. It was like breathing against a gale. He plunged into the magic, trying to ferret out its secrets. Missy joined him, but the language of the kyprios, the nature of its magic, was alien to her.

"Missy!"

Warriors unleashed their swords and charged at them from all sides, howling with fury not fear. Missy gathered deep into herself, realizing they were all going to die. There were too many Boeotians, too much magic to overcome, too many obstacles. Missy went deep into herself, summoning the flames in her blood, willing them into being. So often as a child she had been taught to control it. To contain it. To never let it reveal itself for fear of being hunted and killed. She buried the noise of the thrashing horses, the grunts of the soldiers, the hiss of the winds. Deep into herself she plunged, to the core where the magic always burned. Elven words to control it. Elven words to build it. *Like every flower that starts as a seed. Then a shoot. Then a flower.*

Thas! Kreythas! Anhelthas!

The other words came to her mind. She had never been taught them. They whispered in her soul and the flames came. The flames destroyed.

Missy's hair whipped across her face as the fires exploded around her, booming away from her, ring after ring—like a rock dunked into a pond. The flames charred the Boeotians, scorching their torques and horses as well, turning the tents into cinders. Her blood sang with power. It was like stretching a limb that had for too long been asleep. It was as if she were standing for the first time.

She opened her eyes and saw the devastation around her. The blast of her fire had scorched everything within fifty paces, a complete circle of death. She saw the black druids by the shore, saw their mouths working in horror as they looked at her.

Thas! Kreythas! Anhelthas!

The fires exploded in their midst, consuming them and their robes in a fiery cauldron. She looked another way, saw the main command tent of the Boeotian army and let loose another avalanche of fire. The power bubbled up inside her. She felt larger than the kyprios. Her awareness spanned the heavens. She felt as if she could reach and touch Stonehollow and the cave of red fire hidden there. She opened herself to the magic even more, swallowing it, reveling in it.

"Missy, no!" Tyrus shouted. "Missy!"

Something in his voice snagged at her. Why should she not enjoy the magic? She had the power to destroy the Boeotian army. All the years of fighting would be over, the centuries of bloodshed. Why not stop it? Why not be the one to put an end to the Empress' terrible reign? She could do it, she knew. She could destroy anyone.

She looked up at the sky, saw the swirling vortex of a funnel cloud looming down on them. Gathering her strength, she readied herself to meet it.

"Missy, no!"

The druid howled, a dagger protruding from his chest. Pin appeared behind him and sliced the kyprios rope. It fell to the earth with a thud that caused an earthquake, knocking everyone to the earth, except Missy. Pin stabbed the druid in the back and shoved him down. Tyrus grabbed the kyprios and tried to lift it, but it seemed heavier than a boulder.

"Come, Beloved. Return to me."

She knew his voice even though it had been eight years since she'd heard it.

Two fissures opened up at the same time.

"Run, Missy!" Ty shouted. "Pin, take her! Go!"

Her head swam as she saw the two portals. One opened to the Arch-Rike, to the city itself. There were wizards and warriors near him, and a man in gray. The other opened to a strange woodland where a young woman in gold-fringed robes stood by a hulking turquoise dragon. A rune-carved boulder loomed behind them. The woman said a single word.

"Kyprios."

The dragon's snout split, revealing a row of razor teeth. It extended a claw-like foreleg, its tail lashing the ground, and the cockleshell rose from the earth. Ty clung to it, dragged against the mud, but he refused to let it go. The vortex of winds heaved tents and horses, spear poles and warriors.

Something struck Missy's head. With the world lurching, she fell to the ground, feeling the cracked clay of the kilned mud cut her face. She opened one eye as it blurred with tears, and watched as Tyrus was dragged into the shimmering portal before it winked shut.

Her heart broke as a figure in black emerged from the second portal, lifting and cradling her. They reached the portal again as the full force of the storm struck.

* * *

A fever raged inside Missy Grove. It was a strange sickness, filled with dreams that tortured her. They were torturing her brother in Boeotia. She could feel his pain, could hear the screams inside her mind. Flames burned inside her, writhing like snakes. Everything was wrong. What had she done? Why had she thought she could defeat the kyprios? Her body was wrong as well. The spear had wounded her and though her flames had burned the wound, she sensed it festering, pus-filled and leaching away her life.

From the gloom of her thoughts came a burst of white light.

Elvish words, soothing words, spoken in a soft voice. A flood of warmth entered her body, and the haze of pain and harrowing thoughts lifted.

Missy blinked awake, disoriented. She was lying on a plush bed, draped in blankets, for she was naked. Her sweat and blood had stained the sheets. The bed was rich and ornate and swathed in gauzy veils, with four rune-carved columns twisting up to support a brace. She smelled a heart-fire and a cinnamon-orange flavor in the air, though by the bed stood a brazier of burning eucalyptus leaves.

She heard Khiara's soft voice.

"I healed the wound on her back, but there is another evil festering inside her. That I could not heal. I am sorry, Arch-Rike."

"Is she awake then?"

His voice sounded like music. Missy clutched the sheets and tried to sit up, but a surge of nausea threatened her. She parted the thin veil and saw him, standing there by Khiara. Silver grazed his temples, but his hair was still a rich brown. She would have recognized his face anywhere and it sent a spasm of longing deep into her heart.

He looked past Khiara, for he was taller. "She is awake! Quickly, Khiara. Help her dress. I must speak with her. Quickly!"

Khiara bowed and returned to the bed with a silk robe.

"My friend, you gave us a scare. How did you travel so far so quickly? None of the elven Finders could follow you."

Missy tried to speak, but her mouth was dry. Khiara fetched her some tea and she drank it while slipping her arms into the sleeves. Her hair felt tangled and mouth sores burned at her lips as she gulped down the warm tea. She dreaded a mirror, dreaded the Arch-Rike seeing her like this.

"Ty?" Missy whispered hoarsely. "They have him. The Empress, she has him."

Khiara gripped her shoulder. "I only just arrived. The wreckage of the storm has left its finger all across the land. The Prince had to use the *elzbann* to find you. We do not know the way of wizards as you do. Your fever was severe, my friend. You've been raving for days."

"Days? Has Ty been lost for days? Where is Pin?"

"I'm here, Missy." She saw his shadow beyond the curtain.

"Is she clothed?" The Arch-Rike sounded frantic.

Khiara helped her straighten the robe and smooth back her hair from her forehead. Then she rose and parted the curtain.

"Thank you, Khiara. Your arrival could not have been better timed. Her sickness was truly worrying. Please leave us. There is much we need to discuss."

"As you will, Arch-Rike. The Prince waits upon your grace."

"I will be with him shortly to thank him for the support from the elves. Thank you."

Khiara bowed and retired from the chamber. Missy realized where she was. The armoires and chests, the study desks with statuary and scrolls. These were the Arch-Rike's personal chambers.

"Dearest."

She saw the words catch in his throat as he knelt by the bedside, reaching for her hand. Their fingers clasped. His were warm. The touch of his skin against hers made her flush but the look in his eyes made her stomach lurch. She had longed to be with him again, had longed to hear his voice. But the look on his face spoke of sadness, despair, frantic urgency.

"What is it?" she whispered.

Pin drew near, his shadow falling on the bed. His arms were folded, his frown etched with worry.

Tears started down the Arch-Rike's face.

"Is it Tyrus? Is he dead?"

He shook his head no. "No, dearest. These tears are for you. I felt the flames as you invoked them. When you did that which was forbidden." His choking voice was barely above a whisper. "There are reasons our people contain the flames in the safety of words. You should have been told, as a child, to tame them. Were you ever taught the words of release?"

"No."

"Were you ever told what would happen if you spoke them?"

Missy swallowed. "No."

The Arch-Rike hung his head, clenching her hand so tightly it hurt her. He looked up again, his jaw quivering with emotion. "I do not know how much time we have then, before the next fit comes. The records are not specific. But this much they do say. I've read it so many times I have burned it into my memory. It is one of the first things I learned when I came to Kenatos seeking knowledge about our kind. One of the first books that I transcribed contained it. *For if we tame not our blood, then it will tame us. Not to calmness or reason, but to madness and death. When the words of release are spoken, they can never be unspoken. To death and madness will they yield themselves for they tamed not their blood.*" He swallowed again, his chest heaving. "It was written in chiasma, the beginning repeating itself in the ending. You know the form. To emphasize the danger, an ancient way of authors for shouting a point at us across the ages. Dearest, I have read tale after tale. They all end the same. The kings of Stonehollow all went mad. Your fit lasted for three days and you nearly killed yourself." He gripped her other hand too. "Dearest. There is nothing I can do to stop it. There is no cure. I do not know how long it will be before it consumes you. But the records do not disagree. Dearest, I cannot bear to lose you!"

Missy stared up at Pin and saw the tears in his eyes as well as she realized she had made the gravest mistake of her life.

But a flicker of her, a tiny corner in her heart, rejoiced.

The End

A writer since high school, Jeff Wheeler's interests include medieval history, playing music, Chinese martial arts, publishing Deep Magic, and spending time with family. He lives in Rocklin, California with his wife and three children. He welcomes reader response at www.jeff-wheeler.com.

Leave a note for the author on our Message Boards

continued from page 13

The woman in his arms made a sort of sighing noise, reaching up to press her hand against Phygellus's cheek but instead sideswiping his nose. "My heerooo," she slurred.

Phygellus let her down to her feet gently. "Do you need help getting home?"

"No." The woman giggled. "But-"

"Good." Phygellus gave her a curt nod and turned away, continuing his steady, quick stride down the street. Within minutes, he had dropped the entire incident from his mind.

* * *

Reahe slumped against the doorjamb on the tavern, her head lowered but her eyes on Phygellus as he quickly shrank into the distance. She waited until he had vanished completely, humming an old Rookish drinking song to amuse herself, then turned and walked away in the direction Phygellus had come. Minutes passed, and Reahe let her hand drift towards her stomach, her fingers slipping into the waistband on her skirt. Tucked there, warm now from being close to her body, was a small metal key. She felt the teeth of the key, rubbed it and traced the patterns engraved with her fingernail. It was smaller than she had expected but easily obtained just the same. Phygellus wouldn't even realize it was missing until he returned to Kenatos in four days.

Reahe smiled to herself. There were stories about the hoard of Phygellus. Stories about mountains of gold and jewelry so finely crafted it looked like lace; and books, books Phygellus sold to the priests for small fortunes. Ohh, all that wealth! Reahe felt her fingers tingle with anticipation. What she would do with all that wealth.

A dry, wheezing cackle sucked the warmth of gold from Reahe's body. She stopped, her gaze dragged from the road ahead of her to an alley at her right. What stood in the shadows, Reahe dared not guess, but she could see the faint outline of four legs and the bright spots of two yellow eyes. When it spoke, it had the voice of an old woman.

"Your mind on bright matters, daughter?" it asked. "Ah yes, the brightness of gold. That's what's in your mind. I can see it through your eyes."

Two bright spots of yellow with no pupil. Reahe trembled, dropping her gaze from them.

"The eyes, the eyes," it crooned. "What one sees through the eyes! Do you know what else I see, daughter?"

Reahe shook her head, and it cackled again, clearing its voice for the rollicking verse it started.

"Tomorrow night the moon's bright eye
Will spy upon the city wide.
And as it is watcher of night,
It will thieve upon those with sight.
So mind the opals and the jewels;
Blindness is the reward for fools."

Reahe's fear evolved from paralyzing to driving. She turned and fled.

* * *

Sivedie leaned against an abandoned butchery, trying to roll the small slip of paper tight enough to keep the crushed leaves from falling to the ground. He was only half successful, and

when he tried to light the small roll, the paper burned a brilliant flame down half the roll, then dissolved into flakey embers. Disappointed, Sivedie dropped the remains on the ground and crushed it with his heel.

A hand brushed his shoulder, and Sivedie turned his head to see Reahe, looking pale in the light of the full moon, a heavy scarf thrown across her shoulders even though the night was warm.

"Good, you're here," Sivedie said, popping a warm leekpuff into his mouth. He offered one to Reahe, but she shook her head. "I wondered whether you'd actually meet me, or whether you'd just go to Phygellus's hole and try to pull off the heist by yourself."

"I promised I wouldn't," Reahe said. Her voice was tight and hoarse. "I don't know the location anyway."

Sivedie shrugged. "Fellows is an information reaper. I'm sure he could have told you." He poked another pastry into his mouth, then wiped his hands against his trousers. "From the position of the moon, it seems time. Are you ready?"

Reahe sucked in a deep breath, her hand convulsing around Sivedie's arm. "Maybe… we shouldn't go tonight," she whispered.

Sivedie frowned, suspicion firming his features. "Why is that?"

Reahe averted her eyes, her fingers twisting the edge of her scarf. "I just… don't think it's a wise idea."

"Flying falkifish," Sivedie muttered. "If you're turning into a coward, Reahe, let me have the key and I'll disinherit alone."

He held his hand out, but she jumped back. "No!" she said. "It's only… perhaps…"

Sivedie stared at her, her white face and trembling body, and slowly dropped his arm.

"What's caused you to be so terrified?" he asked. "I've never seen you so ill at ease before a steal. Has the Soothsayer appeared to you?"

Reahe shook her head. "No, but it was just as terrible." She took a deep breath, and Sivedie waited for her to continue.

"I was returning home after the steal last night," Reahe said. "The streets were empty, and I was thinking of all the treasure in Phygellus' hold."

"Like me," Sivedie said.

"Then, there was the sound of an old woman's laugh, but when I turned and looked, there wasn't a woman in the shadows. I think it was…" Reahe took a fortifying breath. "A baljean!"

Sivedie almost shouted with laughter, but he kept his amusement down to a snort. Reahe's frightened expression dropped into a scowl at his disbelief, and when he took her by the arm, she protested.

"A baljean," Sivedie said, guiding Reahe along the street. "A creature that speaks doom in riddles and songs."

"Sivedie, you should have heard the rhyme she spoke to me! It said-"

"Do you think I am so foolish as to follow your superstitions?" Sivedie interrupted.

"Sivedie, if-"

Sivedie stopped, grabbing Reahe's other arm to hold her facing him. "We are about to become richer than most petty thieves ever dream of. I will not let a child's nightmare creature keep me from that."

Reahe bit her lip, her breathing ragged. Sivedie relaxed and released her arms.

"Reahe," he said. "I can't complete the heist without you. There is not time to involve

another thief. Please."

"I'm afraid," Reahe whispered.

"I'll take care of you."

"Do you promise?"

Sivedie froze. She wanted him to bind his life to that.

"Do you promise?" she repeated, her expression and tone insistent.

"Reahe, you don't need me-"

"I promised to meet you here tonight, even with the key in my possession," Reahe said. "You owe me a promise."

Sivedie wanted to curse. "Fine. I promise I'll take care of you."

Reahe nodded, some measure of confidence restored to her eyes. "All right then. It's time Phygellus was relieved of his burden of wealth."

* * *

Sivedie led the way through the streets of Kenatos. On both sides of him were shops, dark and empty, their owners having long ago extinguished the lamps and left for the night. He passed few people, mostly drunks or people pretending to be drunk for their own suspicious reasons, but none paid him any mind. Reahe was following behind, keeping him just within her sight.

Sivedie almost laughed aloud. A baljean? How could Reahe expect him to believe that? Perhaps she had ordered one round too many last night.

He turned into an alley, slowing his steps. They were getting close. Phygellus's store was masked as an abandoned building. Some people knew about it; no one bothered to do anything with the information, usually because they weren't thieves, but mostly because Phygellus kept the only key on his person at all times.

With the key, it wasn't so hard to break in. One just needed to be mindful of all the… booby traps. The more eyes watching for suspicious activity, the better; the fewer the thieves, the greater the split of the wealth.

Sivedie turned another corner and stopped, waiting for Reahe. There were no clouds in the sky, and the moon lit up the city well enough for Sivedie to glance down the street and see the yawning façade of Phygellus's hole.

Reahe turned the corner and gasped when she found herself face to face with Sivedie, her hand jumping to her mouth. Sivedie grinned at her, motioned toward the empty building, and together they hurried across the street to stand in front of the decrepit shop. The large, street-facing window was shattered, and Reahe made to step through it.

Sivedie grabbed her arm. "Don't be stupid."

Reahe looked at him in surprise. Sivedie shook his head, taking the doorknob and giving it a jiggle. He didn't have time to explain every single intricacy of Phygellus' lair.

"You always enter through the door," Sivedie said.

The door swung open with a click, the rusty hinges not even creaking. Sivedie and Reahe squinted into the darkness. The place was in shambles. Pieces of wood scattered the floor, dust coated everything but the floor itself. Alarmed rodents scurried about to find shelter. Sivedie pointed to the right wall.

"There's a door there," he said. "Now, follow me exactly and watch for traps."

Sivedie trod carefully along the left wall, keeping alert for booby traps. He reached a small, dirt-streaked window and stepped onto a plank lying flat across the floor. The board was flat, balanced, and provided a direct route to the door in the other wall. Sivedie reached the door and pulled out a handkerchief, covering his hand before he quickly turned the doorknob and pushed the door open with his toe. He jumped over the threshold, Reahe making the careful leap behind him.

They were in another short, narrow alley, one that turned left from the door and continued between high stone walls to another molding, wooden door.

"Give me the key," Sivedie said, closing the door behind them and replacing the handkerchief.

A glimmer of gold appeared in Reahe's hand, and Sivedie took the key from her.

"Now, this is the trick," Sivedie said. "I'll walk to the other door and unlock it. Then I'm going to throw the key back to you, and you have to unlock this door."

Reahe stared first at the door at the end of the alley, then at the one they were still standing next to, her eyes reaching Sivedie last.

"Why?" she asked.

"It's the way it works," Sivedie said impatiently. "Be glad there's a full moon out tonight; otherwise you might not see the key when I throw it. Run to me after you unlock the door. I may need help."

Sivedie strode up the alley. He put his hand on the knob, the key at the throat of the lock, and glanced back at Reahe. She nodded to him.

Sivedie thrust the key into the lock, turned, and braced himself as he pulled the door open a crack. There was the sound of barking and howling, and the door jammed into his shoulder with all the weight of a wild trelaukie. He threw the key to Reahe, his feet sliding against the ground.

Sivedie couldn't hear the metal clink of the key hitting the ground over the sound of the frothing beasts, but he saw Reahe bend over, her hands scrambling to find the key.

"Hurry!" he yelled.

She jumped up, jammed the key into the lock, and yanked the door open. The beasts lunged with another burst of power, and Sivedie pushed with all his weight against them, groaning with the wood as he tried to close the door.

"Help me!"

Reahe sprinted down the alley, throwing herself at the door. It slammed shut, the lock clicking into place, and Sivedie leaned against the wall, panting.

"Thank you," he said.

Reahe grinned. "Quick! The gold – I saw it!"

The door Reahe had left was hanging open, the key still stuck in the lock. Sivedie and Reahe ran back to it, stopping on the threshold to stare and gape.

The abandoned storefront was gone. In its place was a cavernous room, the ceiling unperceivable, the far wall lost in the gloom. Only one lit torch sat in a sconce by the door, but it cast light on treasure, enough to keep a wealthy woman with no regard as to her expenses for years. Ornate chests, their lids thrown open by the overflowing gold and jewels, were pushed together along the walls. Heavy carved tables hosted plates of silver and gold, precious stones glimmering on the lips, with accompanying knives, forks, and spoons and hosts of sparkling crystal goblets. A mound of bundles sat on another table, a few edges of the fine material

flapping loose to reveal jeweled tiaras and dangling extensions of rich jewelry. Books were stacked precariously high on low tables, their spines showing gold-pressed titles in many languages.

Reahe let out a long, pleasured breath. Sivedie hooted, his hand shaking as he jerked the key from the lock and pushed it into his pocket.

"And this!" he cried. "This is Phygellus's least costly inventory! Wait until we reach the farthest wall, where there are jewels as big as your head and Elvin finery and dwarven craftsmanship are stacked, where books teach you the secrets of the priests and magical instruments give you the gifts of the wizards!"

Reahe laughed and ran to the table of bound jewelry, tearing open a bundle and throwing on a heavy silver necklace dripping with rune-carved jewels. Sivedie grasped the torch and pulled it from the sconce, eager to join her.

Reahe looked up from popping rings on her fingers. "No, leave it."

"It's the only light," Sivedie said. "We'll be blind without it."

"Take the candles." Reahe grabbed them from candelabras. She gave three to Sivedie, stuck several beneath her belt, and lit one carefully from the torch. "We need to leave the torch by the door, to help us find our way back."

Sivedie nodded. He replaced the torch and lit one of his candles off Reahe's, and they ventured slowly into the store hold, pausing often and with great excitement to examine the trove that was all theirs.

"Look at this," Reahe said, lifting up a trioldige with strings of spun gold. "Amazing craftsmanship."

"One of these books could sell for thousands," Sivedie answered, leafing through a text in the dwarvish tongue.

"Oh, if I could leave the life of thievery," Reahe murmured. "I would be a wealthy woman for the rest of my life. I would never be bound by anything or anyone again."

They lapsed into absorbed silence. They picked through the treasure, choosing the finest jewels and oldest books to carry with them in the bags they had brought. After a while, Sivedie glanced back toward the door. He could barely make out a glimmering pinpoint, the still burning torch. How long had they spent there already? How many hours? Was the moon sinking and dawn approaching? Sivedie came across an illustration of a frightful creature, hairy and toothy, towering over a handful of dwarven warriors. He thought of Reahe and the baljean. Had she tried to scare him away from Phygellus's treasure? Disinherit him of his share? He glanced over to where she was trying on different tiaras in front of a towering piece of polished silver. Years of association and he still didn't trust her.

Light exploded in the room, torches sending smoke signals up the walls, chandeliers exposing the vaulted ceiling above, candelabras sparking into flame.

Reahe and Sivedie dropped to the floor, their spent candles trailing smoke as they rolled away.

Sivedie squinted toward the door. He could see two cloaked figures by the entrance, but he couldn't make out their features. He craned his neck to look at Reahe.

"Who is it?" she mouthed, tense and ready to run.

Sivedie shook his head. Who else could have entered? Sivedie clutched at the small lump in his pocket. He still had the key.

"Sivedie, let's leave," Reahe whispered.

Sivedie scowled at her. Reahe grabbed his arm and tugged it. She had discarded her bags and was motioning for him to do the same. Reluctantly, Sivedie set his treasure bags aside, consoling himself that he could snatch some treasure on the escape and led her, belly-crawling, along the dirt floor toward the door. Every once in a while he caught a glimpse of booted feet peeking from behind mountains of treasure and ornate table legs. They came sometimes nearer, sometimes wandering farther away, the steps measured by a person who was searching intently. Sivedie wiggled between a statue of Riyo the Soothsayer and a rack of Elvin blades. He froze as he heard muttering near by.

"…missing…"

"…lucky you found…"

"…wretched thieves."

Reahe hit his shoe. He glanced over his shoulder. She shoved his leg desperately, crawling forward until she was practically on top of him. He rolled to one side, and Reahe slid in next to him.

"Kobras," she mouthed.

Sivedie wanted to curse. They waited, listening. He could still hear the muffled sound of boots, but also he detected a soft sound like pouring sand. There were short, staccato wet sounds, sounds of spitting.

"How many?" Sivedie asked.

Reahe shook her head. "Three?"

"By all the—" Sivedie cut himself off. "It's all right. We just have to get out of here, now." He hesitated. "We should split up."

Reahe tensed, her face panic-stricken.

"If you get in trouble, call for me," Sivedie said. "I'll come, no matter what."

"You promised," Reahe whispered. Her face was pale with fear, her temples shining with sweat.

"I know. I'll come."

After giving him a terrified, trusting look, Reahe wiggled out of their hiding spot and crawled away. Sivedie counted to four, and then crawled away in the opposite direction, trying to distance himself from Reahe only as far as necessary.

Minutes rasped by like the cough of a dying person, each one with the terrifying possibility that they would be discovered, that their lives would pass. Sivedie peered around every corner with a double stab of fear and hope. Hope, that the door would appear close enough for him to scramble to. Fear, that he would come face to face with a pair of shining boots – or worse, gleaming eyes.

He could still hear the stamping of boots, the hissing of the kobras. Sometimes the sounds of danger seemed closer; sometimes they seemed to die completely. Sivedie didn't trust either signal.

His breath was becoming ragged, his elbows scraped from the floor, and Sivedie was sure the door had to be close by. It must be this corner, he thought as he shoved beyond a cabinet of dusty potion bottles.

His eyes followed the slick waves before he could stop them, trailing up the green speckled body to stare at the yellow fangs, the purple flicking tongue, the hypnotizing yellow eyes. Sivedie froze. The eyes, too large and dotted with three tiny pupils, became the only thing he could stare at.

Sivedie found himself transfixed. The giant snake wove in front of him, yellow eyes unblinking, unwavering. Sivedie could have sworn the kobra was smirking at him, triumphant and superior.

"Sivedie!"

Sounds came slowly to Sivedie's ears. He could hear Reahe shrieking, calling his name, sounds of a struggle not far away. She kept crying for him, yelling for help between gasps and groans. Sivedie couldn't look for her. He couldn't break eye contact with the kobra.

"Sivedie, help!"

You promised.

As the thought leaped to his mind, Sivedie gathered his courage and will power. Without a second thought he looked up, immediately arresting Reahe struggling with a man just a few paces away.

Then the kobra spat, and Sivedie felt his eyes go on fire, his vision swallowed up by blinding redness.

But he had seen what he had needed to see. Free from the captivity of the kobra, Sivedie leapt forward, his hip smashing into a stand of something, his fingers outstretched. He jumped, colliding with a mass of bodies, knocking them to the floor. There was a shriek and a curse, and Sivedie fell on top of one of the bodies, his fingers crawling over the face, feeling the stubble and cracked lips. He pulled forth his knife and stabbed down, heard the groan of the man, and rolled off, staggering to his feet.

"Sivedie! Sivedie, come on!"

He felt fingers grasping at his arm, pulling him to his feet. His eyes! The acid was burning into them, eating them away. He heard Reahe gasp, felt her grip slacken.

He stumbled forward. "We have to get out of here."

Reahe's hand tightened around Sivedie's arm. She pulled him along, running. Sivedie tried to follow as best as he could, but his steps were uneven and he kept colliding with tables and racks and statues. Reahe shrieked once and let go of his arm. He reached out, trying to grope his way through to the exit, but everywhere his fingers met barriers. He shouted, desperate that Reahe come back to guide him.

Hands grabbed his shoulders and propelled him forward. His knees knocked against chests and jewels, his vision turning a dark red.

"Reahe?" he asked shakily.

"Sh!" Her breath was hot against his ear. "They extinguished the lights. We only have the torch by the door to guide us."

Twice Reahe stopped him altogether, and he heard her pushing through crates and books and piles of coins to make a way for them. He felt like they had been running forever, running three times the distance of the floor, running and not getting any closer.

"Almost there!" Reahe gasped, yanking Sivedie along by his wrist.

Sivedie could hear shouts behind him, curses and threats in the Kenatos tongue. And there was the slithering sound, the tell tale threat of the kobras. Sivedie's heart jumped up, his eyes flamed with pain renewed, but Reahe halted right then and he slammed into her. He could hear her panting and gasping, felt her hand in his pocket as she claimed in the key and jammed it into the lock.

"Now now now!" she said, and he heard the creak of hinges as she flung the door open and pulled him outside.

Sivedie felt the washing of the cool night air as he sprinted alongside Reahe, turning an abrupt corner back into stale air.

"Where are we?" Sivedie asked.

"The store."

"Do exactly as we did before," Sivedie said sharply. "Cross the plank against the floor and then hug the wall."

Reahe led him, and Sivedie balanced precariously as they half sprinted, half tottered across the plank, leaned against the wall and then slammed their way through the door. And then they were out in the street, running, tripping and scrambling back to their feet as they tore away from the curses of Phygellus and his spitting kobras.

* * *

The sounds of street vendors told him it was morning.

Sivedie acknowledged the change of time with little notice. He wasn't sure what he should do with the coming of the day. Reahe had guided him home, herself in hysterics, barely able to care for herself, much less him. She had sat him down on the edge of his bed and attempted to treat his eyes, but they both knew the futility of the actions. The burning ceased eventually, but a terrible itch remained. Sivedie didn't raise his hands to his face. He didn't ask Reahe what his eyes looked like.

He turned his head in the direction he thought the door to his room was. "Reahe."

There was no response. Sivedie tried louder. There was a sudden clatter in response and Sivedie heard staggered steps across the threshold.

"Yes, Sivedie?"

Sivedie turned his head away again. "You should go home."

"No, I-"

"Fellows will wonder where you are."

"I can make up a story."

"There's nothing else you can do."

That was the finality of the matter. Reahe was quiet for a minute, thinking, then she asked if Sivedie would need anything. He refused.

"I'll be back tonight," she promised.

Sivedie carefully felt his bed, reclining on it. "There's no need."

"But you might-"

"I must learn to deal with this on my own."

He could almost envision her standing in the doorway, leaning against the doorjamb, her head cocked and her lips tight as she shook her head no.

"I'll be back tonight." There was a pause. "Don't do anything foolish."

"Foolish?" Sivedie repeated softly. "No. I only want to get used to this new… condition."

He heard Reahe's soft, quick steps out of his room and out of the house. He had to wait until nightfall, hours and hours from now. He didn't want to move from his bed, to go outside into the world he knew would quiet at the sight of his face and stare. But at the same time, everything in him was screaming for him to leave his house, to escape the eternity of waiting for nightfall.

Sivedie reached down to the cuff of his trousers, yanking it up to his knee. His fingers

crawled across his thigh, feeling along a piece of twine until he found the small coin secured there. He pried it out and pulled it to his chest. He fingered the *carnotha*. He felt the edge that had been nicked years ago in an unfortunate incident with a dwarf. He could imagine the glimmering crystals inside the coin, pale in the dawning sun. He closed his fist around it, held it to his chest, and waited.

When night finally fell, he rose from his bed and left his house.

* * *

Sivedie had thrown a cloak over his shoulders and pulled the hood down to shadow his eyes. He walked down the streets of Kenatos, guiding himself down familiar, memorized routes, the walk to the pub, the street to the temple, the meandering alley that led to a hideaway of Taunters. He tripped and stumbled. Twice he fell to his knees, scraping his palms and drawing the murmurs of passing people. Still, he managed to find his way to each destination, and with every hour his steps grew steadier and more confident. He could walk. *Delightful*, he thought scathingly. But the true test…

Reason told him to wait. Reahe's concerned face rose in his mind, telling him not to do anything foolish. If she had come to his house like she had promised, she would have found him missing. She would be combing the streets now, frantic, terrified, guilt-ridden.

Ah, he knew she was guilt-ridden, and he was glad. It was her fault he was blind. If she hadn't made him promise to take care of her in that awful lair, he wouldn't have had to break contact with that kobra at her call. He could have killed it; he knew ways of distracting the snakes, but he hadn't had time. His promise bound her to him, and he suffered now because of it.

The rolling sounds of the pub reached his ear, and Sivedie leaned toward the left, running his hand along the storefronts. He found the handle to the door of the pub, turned it, and made sure to step over the raised threshold as he crossed into a place so familiar he hardly needed his sight to see it.

He made his way slowly to the bar, taking each step separately and cautiously. He felt the brush of people around him, heard a few even call his name, but he focused on getting to the bar. When he figured he had taken the correct number of steps, he reached out his hand and brushed the back of a chair. Smiling to himself, he pulled it out and sat himself down.

"For you, sir?"

"Root and tonic," Sivedie said.

He had to listen. He had to hear everything with such clarity and precision that he didn't need to see it. He heard the thump of the glass on the counter, and he reached forward slowly, guiding his hand in the direction of the sound, keeping it close enough to the countertop that he could feel the brush of splinters on the back of his hand. His fingertips made contact, and he grasped the glass firmly and raised it to his mouth.

Easy, he thought as he jammed the rim of the cup into his lip. *I just have to get used to wearing a cloak and hood.*

Sivedie heard the shift and groan of the chair next to him, felt as a leg brushed against his. An old, heavy voice ordered an ale, and Sivedie found himself listening to the clink of coins, the careless movements of this man. If only he could see, he would teach that man a lesson about leaving one's money pouch unsecured in his pocket. He didn't even need…

Sivedie stopped that thought before it could completely form. That part of his life was over. It had to be. The Registry would understand that he could no longer thieve without his sight.

What a lie, Sivedie thought to himself as he threw back the root and tonic.

He reached into his pocket to pull out his own coins, when his arm jostled against the man next to him. Sivedie froze.

"Careful, kid," the heavy voice growled.

Sivedie could feel the man next to him, his round, rubbery arm, the folds and folds of cloth. He could even feel the thick thread in the garment.

Just reach out…. Sivedie thought about it. *I don't need my sight. Thieves rely on less.*

Sivedie reached for his coins with his right hand, twisting in his seat as if to get up. With the clatter of coins and his movement, he slid his hand against the other man's cloak, felt the opening, and deftly pulled out the money pouch.

As he rose, Sivedie pushed against the other man with a little too much force.

"Enough now!"

There was the sound of the other chair scraping back, and Sivedie stumbled back. His hood fell back, and there was a collective gasp around the pub. His eyes silenced them all.

Sivedie yanked his hood back over his head. In the silence of the tavern, he stumbled his way to the door, pushing it up and tripping over the threshold into the street. The silence followed him down the street, but Sivedie laughed.

He was still a thief.

* * *

Careful…

Sivedie kneeled in front of the door to the metal worker's shop, tools of the trade pinched between his fingers. He grinned to himself as he worked at the lock, carefully picking and prodding. The lock was a good one, but what else would one expect of a skilled metalworker? Sivedie enjoyed the challenge of the task, the delicate skill required that emphasized touch over sight.

These heists were the easy ones. His blindness was no disadvantage when he knew no one else was watching. It was the small acts of disinheritance performed among the crowds in the blinding light and laughter that required skill and threatened discovery. But working there, alone in the night, Sivedie found a quiet joy.

He felt the yielding of the internal metalwork, the mechanics of the lock falling into the correct places. He heard click after cooperative click, and, with a nudge, the door popped open.

Ahhh. Sivedie smiled, climbing to his feet and cautiously pushing the door all the way open with one finger. He shoved his tools back into their shoulder-slung carrying pouch and entered the shop. The air inside smelled scorched. Siveide listened, but it was silent. He reached his hands forward, cautiously feeling, probing, doing nothing quickly or suddenly. Speed was the cause of a blind thief's demise.

Sivedie's feet crunched over ashes and dead embers. He swept his hands about, touching the cool metal of an anvil. His fingers dug into the charcoal of the fire pit. Sivedie felt his ire spark. *Soon*, he told himself. *Keep searching.*

Fingers found hard, smooth drops of metal. Sivedie brushed them, searched along

counters and floors. He felt a small flash of dissatisfaction, which he quelled instantly. Tedious but rewarding work for a blind thief. Unexciting, but safe.

Finally, Sivedie found what his fingers knew by the slightest touch: a safe cabinet, locked and chained. Sivedie lowered himself to the floor, pulled his tool pouch onto his lap, and set himself to work again. Mechanical.

Within minutes of steady working, the locks clicked free, chains slid loose, and Sivedie felt the cabinet door come free. Eagerly, he pulled it open, brushing his fingers over nuggets of metal, half formed shapes, figurines and goblets, thin twisted ropes and heavy intricate paperweights. Sivedie touched all the treasures, feeling pleasure spread from his fingertips and selecting pieces to shelter carefully in his treasure bag. So simple, so easy, so-

CLANG!

With the tip of his hand, Sivedie knocked over the lightest of goblets, the cup tipping over the edge of the shelf and crashing to the stone floor. Sivedie jumped to his feet and slung both bags over his shoulder as he turned. The momentum of his half-full treasure bag swung him too far. The heavy bag crashed into the safe cabinet and down poured the contents on the shelves, the trinkets and the nuggets dousing him in a deafening rain. Sivedie heard shouts from nearby.

He ran, ran toward where he thought the door was, stumbling and tripping. He slammed his knee and staggered to the left, gasping for breath as he tried to straighten his leg.

"Someone's there!"

"Quick!"

Sivedie staggered forward, his palms reaching the wall. He searched the walls, feeling for the door, a window, an escape.

He heard a bang, gasps and shouts, and the sound of running footsteps. He dropped his bags and turned on his heel, running aimlessly. His boot snagged an uneven stone, and he spilled across the floor.

And then the hands were on him, twisting him into submission and pinning him to the floor.

* * *

Reahe tried to avoid the windows. It was a beautiful, cloudless day, but she would have shuddered to see the deep blue. For from every window she could see the result of a careless or inept thief, from every corner she saw the boot tips swinging in the breeze and the pale, translucent hands that had once been so deft. The images were enough to steal the courage of any thief, the warmth from the heart and the blood from the veins.

Fellows stood in the middle of the room, talking in low tones to the city captain. He had come for information bargaining, of what nature and consequence, Reahe didn't care. She only wished they would conclude their business. The captain often glanced at her, suspicion darkening his features. Reahe dropped her gaze to her hands. They were quivering.

There was a polite knock at the door, and the captain cut off Fellows with a wave of his hand.

"Enter."

A young, puffy-faced inferior stepped into the room, his forehead shining from exertion in the sun.

"The convicts are ready for execution, Captain Woign," the subordinate said.

The captain nodded curtly before turning back to Fellows and speaking to him quietly. He marched out, the inferior following behind.

Fellows pulled a thick piece of durg from his pocket and stuck it into his mouth, chewing thoughtfully. "Interesting," he said, murmuring to himself.

Reahe could bear it no longer. "Are you finished then?" she prodded, taking a step toward him.

Fellows looked up and blinked at her, as if remembering who she was and why she was there. "Yes. Let's go."

He stepped forward and held the door open for her. Reahe all but sprinted out, blinking in the bright sunlight after the darkness of her hiding corner.

As Reahe and Fellows strode across the courtyard, the sound of soldiers' boots and shuffling feet waved up behind them. Orders were shouted, pulleys creaked, prisoners moaned, but Reahe refused to turn her head towards the doomed men and women. Death rituals were short, and by the time Reahe and Fellows had reached the archway out of the compound, the lieutenant was calling the final orders.

"Fellows!"

Fellows turned at the captain's voice. Reahe was bent on continuing through the arch, but Fellows grabbed her wrist and turned her around.

Reahe's gaze snapped involuntarily to the gallows, drawn by the horror, transfixed as she watched the lieutenant's arm drop, the trap-doors collapse, and the bodies that swung there after.

Reahe jerked away from the sight, clutching Fellows's arm. He glanced at her in surprise, and then looked over his shoulder at the spectacle.

"Ah," he said, his voice full of understanding for the womanly weakness at the sight of death. "Grisly death, isn't it?"

Reahe struggled for her breath. "I'll… I'm going to wait outside."

Fellows shrugged, disentangling himself from her frantic grip and striding toward the captain. Reahe took shaky steps under the archway, leaning against the rough wood of a storefront nearby. She shook her head, trying to clear the panicked thoughts from her mind. She had only seen the prisoners for the briefest of seconds. She couldn't have seen…

But Reahe knew it was true. She couldn't bear to look again, not now, so she turned away, walking listlessly through the busy Kenatos streets, not bothering to wait for Fellows, not bothering to look back.

* * *

In the pale light of the waning moon, the bodies were unguarded. No one cared if someone took a body down or mangled it. Once caught, thieves were paid little attention by the city guards.

Reahe scaled up to the gallows unmarked, lifting her eyes to Sivedie's chilling body. His destroyed eyes stared at her, seeming to watch her every movement as he floated before her. Spitting out the bile that rose in her throat, Reahe forced her gaze away from his grave face and scanned his body. He would have it on him. Many thieves did.

Reahe lifted his vest, felt the lining for hard bulges. Nothing. She grasped his thick, woven shirt next. Her fingers brushed the chilled skin, and she shivered. She was about to

abandon her work, leave the prize where it may be, but she felt a weight at the hem of Sivedie's shirt. She tore the hem, the small coin falling into her open palm, and flung herself away from the corpse. She fell to the ground in a heap and scrambled up, running as fast as she could, not once looking back.

A gasping voice chased her from behind Sivedie's body.

"The moon fades to sleep-
Darkness, deceivingly deep.
Moonrise again, far or near,
Will see the treasure you hold dear.
Mind what you steal and what he lends,
Or you will swing beside your friend."

The End

Amy R. Butler is currently a college freshman, exiled from The City to alien cornfields of the midwest. Sivedie and the Stolen Sight *is her third Deep Magic short story, and she's excited by the prospect of building Kenatos and hopes everyone will get involved in the project.*

Leave a note for the author on our Message Boards

continued from page 17

Haggas had raised her to think and stand up on her own, to know the ways of the village, as well as the woods, and to understand the workings of the world at large. More than once, he had told her how proud her mother would have been to see how she had turned out, had she not died when Seanis was a child.

Seanis looked away from her father's eyes. She knew that to look in them, she would only see his concern. She picked up an awl from the table where Haggas had laid it when he had come in from his cobbler shop earlier.

"I am sorry, for being so difficult," she said. She looked at the instrument in her hand instead of Haggas. "I know you want me to marry and that our village is no smaller than most River Folk villages. I know I have it no different than any other River Folk girl. I understand our customs." She smiled at her father, and put the tool with his hat, where he would be sure not to forget it when he returned to the shop.

"Of course you understand them. I am sorry I harp so on that carpenter's son…. If you say he doesn't please you, then I should accept that."

"Which is what I want you to do about the Wilderknights. Accept my decision to join them."

"That is harder," Haggas said, shaking his head and furrowing his brow. "I don't understand them. No one around here ever sees them. I say they are just a notch above common ruffians, out more for their own good than anything else."

"Their own good?" Seanis shrugged and looked around, as if perhaps someone would appear to help her understand his thoughts. "They protect all the River Folk villages from the barbarians and the beasts of the Scourgelands. How is that for their own good?"

"You have heard my thoughts on this before, and I am sure you know them… as well as I know you disagree."

Seanis sighed in frustration. Indeed, she knew his thoughts. As Haggas saw things, the fact that the Wilderknights protected the small and scattered villages of the River Folk was the result of them protecting themselves. He believed that the Wilderknights were less concerned about providing protection, and far more interested in the gifts given them by the villages of the River Folk.

"For all we know, they simply sit around their camps in luxury eating the food we give them," Haggas added.

Seanis shook her head again. "I'll not repeat this argument, father. We have never settled this before, and today will be no different. I came here for your blessing, but I'll go without it, if you cannot give it."

"Dear girl, blessing you into that lot is a hard thing for me to do. You are a girl…."

"And what of that? The Wilderknights' Code puts women and men on equal footing…."

"Equal, yes," Haggas replied. "Equal reward for equal work."

"Exactly."

"And equal chance to die. The further you get from the river, the more dangerous it gets."

"Oh! Don't pretend that it is fear for my safety that upsets you. You know that we live in danger, always, even here by the river. We are never completely safe. Not even when a dozen villages all gather together for Harvest Festival. You know that. We are never truly safe."

Haggas said no more and neither did Seanis. Between them was a covenant not to speak of the past. Neither dared breach it. A thick, heavy silence filled the room, a silence shared by father and daughter for the last eleven years.

At last, Haggas stirred and spoke, turning his daughter's eyes away from the window and the dust specks dancing in the bright rays of the setting sun, and turning her thoughts away from the memories haunting her from that dark, distant day. "At least come to the shop. I'll fit you in a new pair of boots, and I've just made a nice pack you can take with you, too."

Seanis smiled and moved toward the cottage door. When Haggas took up his hat and awl, he smiled back at her, acknowledging her thoughtfulness.

"At least," he said as they crossed the dusty path to the shop, "I know their Code will protect your virtue as a maiden. They may have questionable motives, but at least they have that Code, and in some matters, a good reputation for honor. It's not like you'll be the only River Folk girl to join them."

Walking behind him, Seanis took his words to be the blessing she wanted. "Thank you, daddy."

* * *

Seanis stood in the only permanent settlement of the Wilderknights, a collection of shelters better described as a camp than a village. Center-most in the settlement was a great pavilion where those dwelling in the camp gathered for meals, yet it was no more than a large canvas stretched over a rope tied between two great oaks. Around this were tents, huts, and lean-tos of various design and materials, none plush nor boasting too many comforts.

"It's some testament to your determination that you are even here," said the representative of the Wilderknights in charge of proving the applicants. "Many abandon the cause long before the month in isolation passes. Long before the priests assert their good character, many applicants give up and leave."

Seanis and four others – three young men and another woman – stood there in the presence of a tall man by the name of Calvus, a captain of the Wilderknights. He looked far too much like a warrior and far too little like a woodsman to be a wilderknight, by Seanis's opinion. He was of the dark-skinned human races; his skin was the color of soot, his hair like pitch, cropped as short as possible, stopping just short of being shaved. His face was angular, but expressive and kind. On his belt, besides his sword, he wore a horn, the sign that he was a captain.

"We cannot allow just anyone to claim a place in our ranks," Calvus continued, looking over the five supplicants seeking membership. "We have high standards of honor and skill, and any who might join us must meet them."

Seanis was sure she would.

"In time, you will come to know our ways, our rules, and all that it means to be a wilderknight. It's not an easy life, to be sure, and you will see some in this camp die before the seasons repeat." He gestured to the roughly three dozen men and women in the camp. "Just last week, one of our teams lost half its number. Not two days' north of this very camp, the hand of the Scourgelands came upon them. Scourgewolves on the hunt, straying so near…. and taking the lives of six of our own."

"Aren't the Scourgelands a full week's march from here?" asked Rinth, one of the men with Seanis wishing to join.

"Yes, they are," Calvus answered. "But it's a dry season, and the beasts of that fell place have extended their reach."

A dread, nervous quiet fell on those under the pavilion. Calvus let it abide a moment, then added, "And not a half day from North Guard, another team came on a party of barbarians."

At the mention of the barbarians, four of the applicants recoiled. Seanis, however, made no response, outwardly, at least – no more than to bear down hard, teeth against teeth, and swallow.

"Yes, to be sure. No less than a score of them, making their way around Headwaters Lake," Calvus continued. "No match, to be sure, for the bows of a dozen wilderknights, though, but that they drew so near, so boldly under the light of day…. All to say that our life as wilderknights is not one of ease."

Seanis employed great effort and focused on Calvus's words. Her nearly stoic response in light of the flinching of the others did not go unnoticed. Calvus turned a keen eye to her and the corners of his mouth hinted at a slight smile. Seanis took his look as an attempt to discern her, to know by looking what lay beneath her expression. At last his inspection gave way, and he went on describing the life the applicants could expect.

"But all of that," he concluded some time later, "will come in time. For the rest of this season and some of the next, you will work, here in the camp, doing things to help the rest of us… and, of course, training. You will not like it, but it's part of the process. In the end, you will know our ways, and be stronger and more skilled."

He accepted the nods from the applicants as their agreement to the terms. "Well, now, I'd like to hear from you why you want to take on the hard life of a wilderknight."

In turn, each of the applicants explained their desire to join the River Folk's defenders. Two of them, Corbin and Fallon, had similar desires. Neither found satisfaction in apprenticeships to the trades and wanted for something less routine, something more adventurous. Marious, the other lady in the group, explained that she had lived for nearly a third of her life expecting to marry a particular man in her village. When he had taken a wife from a nearby town at the last Harvest Festival, she was distraught.

"After the wedding," she explained, "I could not bear to walk the streets anymore. I couldn't stay there and see them every day. I had to get away."

Rinth's motivation came from a sense of duty and legacy. He explained that his father had been a wilderknight and that he had grown up always knowing he would take a turn defending their people.

When Rinth was finished, Calvus turned to Seanis.

"And what is the story of the fair-haired young lady. Seanis, I believe?"

"Yes, that's my name." She blushed a bit, surprised at the reference to her hair. That was not what she expected from the captain. Her fair skin, complementary to her hair, gave away her embarrassment, turning flush.

"Do tell us," Calvus said with an encouraging smile, "what makes you want to leave your home and come live here."

"Well, I want to feel like I am part of making things better," Seanis began. "For the rest of the River Folk, I mean."

By the time she had finished her tale, she was emotionally spent. Calvus was relentless in his questioning, drawing from her even the details she would not discuss with her father. At last, he was satisfied and allowed Seanis to conclude her account.

When all were done with their stories, they ate, sharing with the wilderknights a dull meal of beans, cooked and served from a great cauldron near the pavilion, and bread, baked in

a crude brick oven beside it. Seanis ate quietly, all her thoughts turned inward as she wrestled with her past. After the meal, Marious and Seanis were shown to a lean-to sided with bark and roofed by thatch where they would sleep.

Marious drifted off quickly, but Seanis could not. She feared the dream. She was sure Calvus's unyielding probing would stir her unconscious, and force her through another night of despair.

* * *

Somewhere near half-night, slumber came to Seanis, and with it came the dream. For eleven years she had dreamt it – nightly for a long time, tapering gradually to weekly, and then finally only on nights some occasion forced her to recall the past. The dream was a mixture of her memories – the things she actually saw as well as the details filled in by others – all interpreted through the eyes of a nine-year-old little girl. Though years had passed, the events of the dream were unchanged, immutably fixed deep in her mind. It came, always the same.

The first consciousness of being in the dream came as the nine-year-old daughter of Haggas and Maddalon sat on the back of the cart looking between her parent's shoulders at the swishing of the mule's tail that pulled it. She sat there proudly among stacks of shoes and boots her father had made.

"Will it take long to get there?" she asked.

"Not long," her father answered.

"Will you sell all the shoes?"

"Yes, dear," her mother replied. "Your father is the best cobbler in all the villages, all the way to Millton, at least."

"Only to Millton?" Haggas asked, teasing his wife.

"In all the Hinterlands!" Seanis declared.

Her mother, at that, turned around and smiled at her daughter. It was clear in her eyes that she shared Seanis's pride for Haggas's craft, but it was not Maddalon's eyes that riveted the gaze of the little girl.

"Mommy!" she squealed. "You are wearing the shell necklace I made you!"

Her mother just smiled and nodded. She fingered the mussel shell her daughter had found on a rock by the river, then let it dangle from the leather cord her husband had fashioned. Seanis had managed to find six round wooden beads in the village, and added them to the cord, three on each side of the shell.

"Remember when I found that?" Seanis asked after the giggling subsided.

"Yes," her mother replied. "You were so excited to find it because the light markings against the black look just like an acorn."

Seanis nodded, a content smile filling her face from ear to ear.

Around her, at that moment, the woods became a blur and the miles between them and Drovers Rest were instantly crossed.

"Daddy, why did we have to come so far for Harvest Festival?" young Seanis asked.

"It was their turn to have it. It was only this morning we left White Stone, and didn't you enjoy the inn there?"

"Yes, it was nice."

"Besides," Haggas added, "the people who will be at the festival in Drovers Rest will have

more need for shoes!"

At that, Seanis just laughed and laughed. She laughed so hard, her eyes filled with tears and her vision blurred. But, with the blurring of her sight came also darkness, and with the darkness came terror.

Wiping away the tears, no longer tears of joy, but rather tears of leaching sorrow, the nine-year-old Seanis began to see the dark shapes of men moving, silhouettes against the orange glow of fires. Anguish filled the night air, echoing in her ears from everywhere, and smoke of burning hay and thatched roofs choked the breath from her.

Haggas's cart was overturned, and she leaned against it with her back. The mule was gone, taken early in the raid by one of the dark moving forms.

At that moment, through the smoke and across the darkness, a shape, a still shape alone on the ground, became fixed in Seanis's eyes. Crawling first, then rising and running, she crossed the distance, expanded by the dream, each step slowed and desperate.

Around her as she forced each step forward, the dark shapes took form, becoming men dressed in buckskin vests and rough pelt britches. They carried axes, spears, and swords, ever running, ever shrieking. Faces of these men began to appear, varied in shape, some scarred, some bearded, but some fresh and young.

None of the men hindered her, ignoring her altogether instead. Struggling against the dream, as with feet mired in heavy mud, she came, finally, to the shape lying alone, unmoving on the ground.

There she stopped, her fear too great. At that point, even the dream, with all its years of power over her, could not make her look. Instead, she turned away. She knew who it was that lay there, motionless, dead. In the dream, she didn't need to look.

Instead, she turned to see a young man, a boy barely half again her age, skulking toward her. Blood spatters on his face denounced any innocence that might be credited his youth, and the trappings he wore assuaged any doubt of his allegiance. He approached her, a malevolent smile on his face, curved dagger in hand.

"See what I did?" he said, giving a nod toward the still figure behind Seanis.

Frightened beyond speech, she answered with gesture alone.

"See what I took?" he said, fingering a shell necklace bearing light patches in the shape of an acorn.

Twenty-year-old Seanis awoke. Cold wetness covered her, soaking nightdress and blanket. Her heart raced and she panted short, clipped breaths. Minutes passed before she stilled herself enough to recline once more, and when she did, sleep was hard sought and fitful.

* * *

Seanis awoke, immediately realizing it would be her first day as an applicant in the settlement of the Wilderknights. It was still dark, but the camp was abuzz with activity. The obvious sound of approaching footfalls unnerved her, so she sat up and drew her blanket around her, fighting off the ill effects of the restless night.

Marious rolled over, too, her long black hair falling comically into her face. Combing it away with her fingers, she smiled at Seanis, and then looked to the entrance of their shelter.

A head popped in; it belonged to a kind-faced woman who, by virtue of the horn hanging from her belt, was clearly another captain of the Wilderknights.

"Good morning, ladies," the woman declared. "I have brought you a luxury for your first day in camp."

She placed a basin of water, wisps of steam playing on its surface. "My name is Candace. Hurry, and come join the rest of us."

Taking turns, Seanis and Marious washed quickly and dressed.

While doing so, Marious asked, "You seemed unsettled last night. Did you not sleep well?"

"I had bad dreams," Seanis answered. "I hope I did not keep you awake."

Marious's brown eyes, opened and refreshed by the warm water, turned kindly to Seanis. "No, I slept soundly. Only once did I notice you being upset. I slept well enough, for only having a straw mat and blanket."

Emerging from their shelter, the two young women hurried to the pavilion where, already, most of the rest of the camp was gathered. Porridge was dipped for them out of a large kettle that took the place of the cauldron from the night before. Conversations under the canvas were hushed, private, and brief. All the wilderknights seemed focused on getting to the duties of their day.

Seanis recognized a few of the faces from her arrival the day before. Calvus had told them not to worry about learning names right away, for the wilderknights that were using the camp would change frequently.

"In this camp," he had explained, "the teams only pass through for a couple days' rest."

Across the table from the ladies sat Rinth, but by the look on his face they decided he was hardly awake, so they did not disturb him. He leaned with his head resting boyishly on his hand, elbow propped on the table's edge, and fingers twined in his dark hair.

Seanis and Marious ate quietly for a moment before Marious offhandedly said, "I like the porridge." Her voice seemed much too loud by comparison to those around her, so she quickly fell silent.

Her remark was heard, however, by the cook. "You like it?" His tone was jolly and loud – by far louder than Marious had been. All those in camp looked up and smiled at the scene. "Well, my next duty today will be to teach you how to cook it. Starting tomorrow, breakfast will be your job. Hurry and eat, and I'll let you help me with the second batch."

The energy in the cook's voice stirred even Rinth, raising his head and turning the corners of his mouth up into a wry smile. As with Rinth, the cook's conversation with Marious raised the attention of Candace. She stood and walked to where the group was gathered.

"Since we are making assignments of duties, I will assign you, Rinth, to be Marious's assistant. It will be your job to fetch the wood for the fire and draw water from the well."

"No problem," Rinth responded with a sleepy nod.

"Seanis, you will clean up after them." Candace turned to Corbin and Fallon and they were assigned to the daily replenishment of firewood, and the other applicants, as they arrived, were given similar duties.

Before the week ended, seventeen more wishing to join the Wilderknights arrived at the camp. Before the month ended, all but ten of them had gone home, deemed unqualified to be part of the Wilderknights. The ten that were left – then considered recruits rather than applicants – were divided into two groups, and all the menial tasks of the camp were permanently assigned to them, freeing the experienced wilderknights to fully benefit from their respites.

Seanis was grouped with Rinth, Marious, Corbin, and Fallon, the five being assigned to

the tutelage of Candace and Calvus. When not cutting wood, cooking, and cleaning, they trained. Each day began with community prayers led by a priest who dwelt among the wilderknights. Then, after their chores were done, the recruits trained.

They began by running distances, short at first, but ever lengthening with time. Next, they practiced archery skills, followed by sword drills using wooden batons. Each afternoon differed, but always required some endeavor to improve the work of the wilderknights, most taxing muscle and lung. Trails were cleared, watch blinds were built, and other such tasks were performed. Evenings were passed learning to craft bows and fletch arrows, and discussing the Code and how it governed the doings of the Wilderknights. It was hard work, but sharing it helped create bonds within the recruit teams. In fact, the sharing of the breakfast duties forged a closeness between Seanis, Marious, and Rinth.

At last, the season passed and new applicants were expected. In preparation for finally leaving the camp and continuing their training further into the untracked areas of the Hinterlands, the recruits were summoned to the shelter that served as an armory. Each recruit was matched to a sword that fit him or her in size and weight and given bows and arrows fitting their skill. Quickly, all in the team had conceded that Seanis was the most gifted archer and when she was given a quiver larger than the others, they all shared smiles of approval.

"Tomorrow," Calvus explained to his recruits after they were equipped, "we set off to meet the others in the team you will be joining. Pack well and get plenty of rest."

"As of now," Candace added, "you are wilderknights. Your training is far from complete, but you have earned the title. We will build on what you have been taught here in camp, but the time has come to start working."

That night, after packing their equipment, Seanis and Marious settled down for their last night in the shelter. It would be at least six weeks before they would return to the camp for a turn to rest, so they relished the relative comfort.

The last night in camp spawned further anxiety for Seanis. She feared the dream, more that night than others. It had been over three weeks since the terror of the dream had visited her, and she hoped her last night in camp would not be spoiled. When she startled awake at half-night, wet from perspiration, her emotion was more anger than terror.

Why tonight? she asked. *Of all nights, I need to sleep soundly, why tonight?*

In her angry mood, the horror of the dream was forgotten. With much more ease than usual, Seanis adjusted her pallet, turned over and went back to sleep.

* * *

Roads in the Hinterlands would hardly pass as trails in other places. Trails there would elsewhere be unnamed tracks. However, such paths were easy going when compared to many of the courses used by the wilderknights.

Seanis and her team had traveled three difficult days over paths intentionally left vague and hard-passed. Awaking the fourth day after leaving the camp, Seanis found Candace passing out machetes.

"The trails behind us are left to grow thick to make passing hard for our enemies," she explained, "but the trail we will take today is used to travel quickly between two stations we use frequently. Today, we will be clearing back some overgrowth."

Corbin and Fallon took the cutting blades from her right off. They were both brawny men

to whom were given large two-handed swords. They made most everything a game between them, but rarely cared who won.

"Let me have one," Corbin declared. "I bet Fallon won't be able to cut his side of the path half as fast as I can mine!"

So the contest began, but within half an hour, neither of them talked much.

"It's harder on the lungs than the arms," Fallon admitted, handing his tool over to Seanis.

Rinth took Corbin's and the work continued. After Fallon and Corbin's initial contest, the blades traded hands often, and all seven wilderknights shared the labor.

"This is good work to improve your sword stroke," Calvus declared when it was his turn to chop.

At half day, they stopped by a clear running stream and made a lunch of jerky and hard bread. They rested quietly as they ate.

"Well, we should be back at it," Candace declared after a little while.

As they arose and hefted their packs, Rinth asked with a smile, "Is trail cutting part of the Code? Or did you two just add this in for our benefit?"

When the laughter subsided, Candace responded. "Keeping trails between stations clear for fast travel is actually part of the Code."

"Makes sense to me," Corbin said taking up a chopping blade once more.

"Who made up the Code?" Marious asked, taking up the other.

Everyone on the team paused and turned toward her. Calvus and Candace looked at each other, surprised by the question.

Seanis intervened. "We have been so busy learning the Code, I don't think we have ever been told where it came from."

Calvus shrugged. "It was made by the Forefathers. The ones that first came to live in the Hinterlands. They established the Code as a way to be safe against all threats, especially against The Plague."

"The Wilderknights had Forefathers? The River Folk call our first ancestors Forefathers, too" said Marious.

"Well," explained Calvus, "they should…. We are from the same founders. We are from the same people."

"Then how did Wilderknights get the Code?" Rinth asked.

"The Code came to all the people of the Hinterlands," Candace explained. "When the Forefathers came here to escape The Plague, they set up the Code to keep us all as safe as possible. The people of the villages have forgotten or ignore most of the Code, but the Wilderknights have always strictly kept it. As for that, it is the Code that called for a group to be appointed to live apart from the villages, but to protect them from harm."

"Yes," Calvus added. "The Wilderknights did not make the Code. The Code made the Wilderknights."

"To protect against The Plague, you say?" Rinth asked. "The Code protects against the Plague?"

"If followed entirely, yes," Candace answered. "As one example, the Code says villagers are not to visit other villages except when necessary. That's why the traditions of the Harvest Festivals were created. Once a year, when there is no threat of The Plague, the people gather to meet, trade, and do all the things that go on at the Festival. If followed strictly, it would be hard for The Plague to be spread from village to village."

"So that's why wilderknights have to stay away from the others?" Seanis concluded. "So we can't spread it? And that's why the villages have cache-spots for us, where they leave their gifts?"

"That is right," Calvus answered. "If wilderknights enter a town, they are reckoned unclean for a period of a month. A full moon cycle must pass before they can have contact with other wilderknights."

They began chopping their way along the trail as they continued to talk. The details of the Code – viewed as protection not only from the Scourgelands and the barbarians, but also as protection against The Plague – began to make sense.

"So that's why we had to stay a month in Isolation Grove before coming to the camp," Seanis concluded.

Calvus nodded his head and looked at her with a smile.

Just then, Candace held up her hand, a signal for silence to those behind her, and hissed, "Sssssssh" to Marious and Rinth, who swung the machetes. They froze in response to her sign, and turned quickly to see what had alerted her.

She was kneeling at the side of the trail, fingering animal tracks.

"Fresh?" Calvus asked.

She nodded her head.

"What is it?" Fallon asked, laying his hand on the hilt of the sword he slung from his back.

"Scourgewolf."

Calvus looked over her shoulder and nodded his confirmation.

"I have never seen them this far south," Candace declared.

"It's the drought that drives them," Calvus stated.

"Enough talk, then," Candace concluded. "We must not take our safety for granted, if scourgewolves roam this far south."

The agreement among the team of wilderknights was nearly tangible and a sober mood fell over them all.

"Someone should string a bow and nock an arrow," Calvus declared. "Sometimes, felling the pack leader will cause them to scatter, or even turn on him instead of us."

At the mention of the bow, everyone turned to Seanis. She knew what they expected, and was happy to comply.

"But," she pointed out, "if I am to walk with arrow to string, then I'll not be able to swing the cutting blade."

"Don't worry about that," Rinth declared. He smiled at Seanis, took the machete, and added, "Leave that to one less fit to shoot a bow."

* * *

On that day cutting brush from the trail, the threat of scourgewolves was never faced, and the seven that had set out eventually reached the camp of six others, whom they joined to form a full wilderknight team. But over the next half-year, scourgewolves and other creatures from the Scourgelands became frequent parts of Seanis' and her team's experiences. Always, in those early days as a wilderknight, the threat was met and turned away, Seanis's bow often playing a key part.

Besides her skill with the bow, Seanis began also to find ease turning a blade meant not

for clearing brush. Her sword grew comfortable in her hand; the on-going rehearsals with the wooden batons gave rise to her confidence – confidence that she knew would eventually be tested.

The test came as her team rested in a station five days' march due east of the permanent camp, as the bird flies. It had taken them nine days by trail to reach the post. They were tired when they arrived, and looked forward to resting in the relative safety of the station for a couple days before setting out on another weeklong patrol across the dangerous tract lying between the Scourgelands and the villages of the River Folk.

"There it is again," Fallon insisted.

"I heard it, too," Calvus said. He already had his sword in hand.

A sound like a sapling being snapped off crackled through the forest surrounding the camp. Everyone heard it, removing any doubt about Fallon's assertion.

Seanis, Rinth, and Marious strung bows quickly while Fallon and Corbin drew their blades and formed a line with Calvus and Candace facing the sounds. The six veterans joined them quickly, three with bows and three with blades at ready.

A moment passed, the woods filled only with the sounds of wind in the trees. Some of the team shifted their weight nervously. Someone sighed, as if concluding the threat had passed.

A breath later, the underbrush half an arrow's flight away separated violently, and a beast never before seen by any of the team charged. A heavy head, twice the size of a bull and like-horned, jutted forward on a thick neck, dangerous predator fangs in its gaping jaw gnashing. It charged on two legs, looking down from a height easily half again that of a tall man. Long arms bulged from broad shoulders and ended in vicious-looking three-fingered claws. It covered the separation in a sprint, reaching the foremost of the wilderknights before the archers could nock their third arrows.

The arrows that hit it seemed not to slow it, and its speed made it a difficult mark to hit in the first place. Once among those with swords, its power became obvious. Though they hacked at its scaly hide, they drew little blood, if the black ooze it emitted from the wounds was, indeed, its blood.

Using its long arms, it flailed away at those who stood before it. Seconds only were needed to dash six of the team to the ground, leaving Corbin alone to face it. The archers, as if of one mind, released their arrows, and the combined impact evoked a flinch in the creature. Corbin used that flinch to lunge forward and thrust his sword into the beast's throat.

It repaid the gesture with a vicious, swiping claw, landing a blow aside Corbin's head. It followed his tumbling body to where it fell motionless and hovered over him, claiming its prey and daring any to approach.

Seanis took its dare, drawing her sword, and charging at it. Seeing its strength against the others, she made it her intention to avoid its reach, but her threat was enough to lure it a step away from Corbin.

"Surround it! Attack it from the back!" Calvus yelled, as he reclaimed his feet and stumbled back into the fight. The rest of the archers drew swords and joined immediately, and as the others were able, they returned to attack the beast, as well.

Corbin's sword clearly had slowed the beast, and within minutes the hacking of all the others on its back as it turned to face one way, and then another, prevailed over it. It fell dead, circled by ten wilderknights.

They buried Corbin and two others there in the station.

* * *

The death of teammates was hard on everyone, but especially Fallon. He was never the same after Corbin died. The loss of his friend made the hardships and dangers of the wilderknights' life unbearable. So, four weeks later, when it was their well-deserved turn for a few days in the permanent camp, he gave back his sword and bid the life of the Wilderknights goodbye. With his departure, the team numbered only nine, so three new recruits joined Seanis, Rinth, Marious, Candace, Calvus, and the other four veterans on their team.

When time distanced the dreadful events enough to quell the emotional sting of Corbin's death, the team sat with the priest under the canvas of the pavilion. They talked about the attack and the beast they faced.

"What was that thing?" Seanis asked.

Calvus and Candace shrugged and looked to the priest. The old man had lived in the Wilderknights' permanent camp longer than anyone. He was respected for his wisdom and experience.

"I cannot say," he answered. "There live in the Scourgelands many creatures with forgotten names."

"And it is our job to keep them in there and unremembered?" supposed Rinth.

"Not hardly," the old priest responded. "The Scourgelands are far too vast to be guarded by no more than eight score humans, even if they are wilderknights. No, it is a good work done if you can steer them away from the River Folk villages. No more than that can be expected."

* * *

With the passing of seasons, Seanis grew more and more at ease with the life of a wilderknight. The threats of the Scourgelands, real and frequent, left little room in her mind for the dream, and when it did encroach, fatigue made going back to sleep easy.

Fallon's decision to quit the Wilderknights and go home after the death of Corbin left Seanis, Marious, and Rinth alone to represent their cohort of recruits. Over the passing of seasons, some of the experienced veterans left the Wilderknights to return to their homes. Other recruits replaced them, and in time Seanis, Marious, and Rinth became considered veterans themselves. Of the eight others on the team that first introduced them to the life of guarding the River Folk's villages, besides Calvus and Candace, only two others remained.

Jof and Clay were quiet and kind, willing to share what they had, and to do more than their portion of the work. Yet, they kept mostly to themselves. Now and then, they would tell an amusing story and laugh along when they heard tales told by others, but they did not make an effort to learn about their companions, nor did they provide much of a chance for the others to learn about them.

"I don't mean to be rude," Jof explained once, when Marious asked him about it. "I just don't want to be so sad when one of you dies or decides to pack up and go home."

"Bah," Clay replied. "You told me it was to keep everyone from being sad when you get yourself killed."

Marious thought they were kidding, but when they said no more, she did not press the question. Their private behavior did not bring risk to the team, so it was ignored.

Seanis's team, for months, patrolled an area due east of Headwaters Lake, their watch

taking them as far from Vanishing River as anyone dared go. Hardly a day passed that did not yield at least signs or tracks of Scourgelands danger.

"If I had known such beasts as these came this close to the villages," Seanis remarked one day after they tracked down and killed a pack of a half-dozen scourgewolves, "I would have never slept."

Calvus laughed and replied, "Well, it's not so close as all that. We are seventy five miles from the river, you know."

"All the same…." Seanis answered. "All the same, had I known…."

"Come now," Candace stated, "you seem more a threat to the creatures we have seen of late than they are to you. You don't seem to be bothered very much, for all the dangers present."

Seanis shrugged. "Well, I'd hate to face the Scourgelands. We are still days away from only the edge of them. If it is this bad, this far from them, I certainly do not want to get any closer."

Everyone agreed.

Patrolling the tracts between the Scourgelands and the River Folk villages was certainly difficult and dangerous, but Seanis embraced the challenge, drawing resolve from it. The dangers of that area were beasts and creatures, dreadful to be sure, but dreadful in a way that gave no power to the dream. The threat from the Scourgelands did not come from humans; it was humans whose hands wove the horror of the dream. Seanis knew her team would eventually be called away to the north, toward Headwaters Lake from where the barbarians of Boeotia would come. Such thoughts unsettled her more than anything, for she had lived her whole life a slave to the terror brought upon her by them on that distant Harvest Festival day.

* * *

The day had been routine – as routine as any patrolling the Hinterlands. As the sun set, they came to a wilderknight station, looking forward to the relative comfort it would provide. A two-walled shelter was erected there, roofed with thatch, and the fire circle had been improved to include split logs as benches and shelves of rock to balance cooking pots.

But reaching the shelter, they knew they would be able to enjoy its amenities for only a night. On the edge of the station – all stations – there stood a pole devised for communication.

"The far-runner pole has been pegged," Candace declared, as they were putting down their packs.

Everyone immediately looked. The pole stood eight feet tall, a foot thick, and into it were carved two images: one the shape of a man, axe in hand, the other the shape of a wolf. Beside each image, a hole was bored, and from a chain beside them hung a peg. The peg had been placed in the hole beside the image of the man.

"We will have to head west, first thing in the morning," Calvus stated with a forlorn shake of his head. "And I had hoped to spend a night or two here."

Jof began making a fire while the others began preparing for dinner. They expended minimal effort setting up the camp they would use only one night.

As they ate, Rinth said to Seanis, "So what do you think it means? The far-runner marking the man, that is? Big trouble, or just threats?"

Seanis just shrugged, not even looking up from the food balanced on her lap.

"I'd say it must be serious," Marious remarked, "for the far-runners to come this far to peg

the pole."

Rinth nodded.

"I'd agree," Calvus replied, "but there is no telling. By the time we get there, whatever the situation was thought to be might turn out to be nothing, or it might turn out to be worse. We'll know more as we get closer."

Seanis looked up hopefully.

"How do we know it was a far-runner, anyway?" Marious asked.

"Well, we don't," Candace answered. "But if we get to the next station and the man is pegged there, too, then we keep going toward Boeotia. We leave this one pegged, so other teams coming this way will know to go west, as well."

Seanis looked up at the pole, and then shook her head. Though she kept looking at it, the peg stayed by the man, not the wolf. They had seen poles pegged by the wolf often, signs that beasts from the Scourgelands had been seen in the area. They had pegged plenty of poles themselves. This was the first time the man had been pegged, and being so far to the east, away from the lands of Boeotia, it could only be concluded that the matter was grave.

"Get plenty of rest," Calvus said when the meal was finished. "We will need our strength to travel fast."

Seanis knew before lying down that her sleep would be interrupted. She knew the dream would intrude.

* * *

They traveled fast, and each far-runner pole they found was identically pegged. Whatever was happening, had happened, or might happen, was obviously considered extreme by the captain of the far-runners.

Each mile closer to the village of North Guard and the wilderknight stations of that area increased the dread in Seanis. Coming from the scattered groves and woods into the pastures grazed by free-range cattle and sheep increased her anxiety, reminding her of the area around Drovers Rest, and rekindling thoughts of that horror. Nights became ruled by the dream and days spoiled by the memories it recalled.

Her demeanor did not pass the notice of her friends and teammates.

"Just don't do something to get yourself killed," Clay advised.

"Yeah, be careful," Jof added.

Their advice to the obvious was appreciated, but did little to comfort Seanis. It did, however, motivate her to heighten her attention to her duties to the team.

I will not let them down, she pledged to herself.

A few marches later, they came to the stations nearest the northern region of Headwaters Lake and the village of North Guard. There, because the area was closest to the territory of Boeotia, the far-runner poles included not only the man and wolf symbols, but also a depiction of the lake and river with indications of the villages. Therein could be set smaller markers to more clearly direct any wilderknight teams that came upon them.

By such indication, Calvus led the team south, toward Willow Ridge. Near half-day, they joined another team and pushed on.

"How big is Willow Ridge?" Rinth asked.

"About average. A score or so families," Candace replied. "Anyone able will be armed by

now. If the far-runners came as far to the east as to find us, they have certainly alerted all the villages."

"So our side might be sixty strong?" Rinth concluded.

"Perhaps seventy five," Calvus responded. "Lads, ladies, and men all counted, plus the two-dozen of us."

"How…" Seanis began. She swallowed hard. "How many barbarians will there be?"

"There is no way to know," Candace answered.

Seanis followed Calvus and the rest as they rushed toward Willow Ridge, passing in and out of groves and glades. The path the wilderknights followed abruptly spilled into the rough road built between Willow Ridge and North Guard. Calvus paused only a moment to read the tracks.

"Too many men passing south to count," he concluded.

Seanis could feel her pulse pounding, and her breath came short, in gasps, as she hurried after Candace with the others. About an hour passed before they reached the edge of the village.

Calvus moved forward again and the team followed. Seanis followed mechanically with the rest, mind crowded by unspeakable fears.Fear gripped her, locking her gaze forward and paralyzing her steps. She was barely able to stand, and conversations around her seemed distant and vague.

"Look, more wilderknights," a villager declared.

"What happened here?" Candace asked.

"Raiding party last night," a villager replied.

Seanis barely made out the words spoken around her. Images of the past crowded her consciousness. What she heard was clipped fragments of the conversation.

"How many?"

"Two score…"

"Did you defend against them alone?"

"No, two wilderknight teams where already here when they arrived."

Seanis's thoughts drifted away once more, carried back in time by the mention of Harvest Festival. For a moment, she was nine again. For a moment, the night sky was lit by the glow of fire and filled with sounds of dismay.

I cannot do this, she thought. *It is too hard. It is too hard…*

Her doubts vied against her desires a moment more.

I will not give up. I will not.

Seanis turned her attention to the group of wilderknights and village leaders circled nearby.

"It's good to know you guys are around," the villager replied. He rubbed his hand thoughtfully over the back of his neck. "We've been hearing of a fair lot moving north of the lake."

"As have we," Calvus replied.

The villager nodded.

* * *

Seanis and her team of wilderknights set off to track the barbarians who had survived the attack and escaped, following them back to the north. They were easy to track, making no efforts

to conceal their passing, and the wilderknights were able to follow them from a safe distance.

They passed out of the area without further contacting the River Folk in any way. Seanis and the team came to a station ten miles past North Guard and stopped. There was no need to go further, for the far-runner already in camp had determined that danger existed.

"Several of the barbarian clans have raiding parties, not two-days' march from here," he explained. "Myself, I counted three score in one camp."

"Women and children too, or just men?" Calvus asked.

"Men and older lads," he replied.

The team fell speechless and only the crackling of the fire spoiled the silence. Each person's thoughts turned inward, some reflecting, others planning.

Seanis let the meaning of the words sink in, realizing that it would not be long before she would have to face the barbarians.

I'll have to be stronger, she thought. *The past is the past. I can't go on letting it make me helpless.*

The far-runner left early the next morning, carrying his latest information to the message posts on his route. Seanis and her team ventured a morning patrol, but returned to the wilderknight station by noon. They waited out the day there, joined at sunset by another team.

Calvus, Candace, and the newly arrived team's captains withdrew to discuss the situation, leaving the rest of the team to their own designs. Jof and Clay produced whetstones and refined the edges of their swords. Rinth, Marious, and Seanis sat quietly by the fire, conversing in hushed voices.

"You seemed upset in the village yesterday," Rinth remarked.

Seanis affirmed his assessment.

"What was it?" Marious asked.

"They just reminded me of my bad time in the past."

"When your mom was slain by them…." Rinth spoke the words she would not say.

Seanis only nodded.

"Well," Marious added, "just know you can count on us. We'll help you get through this."

"We all need to count on each other," Jof said from his place to the side.

The three were surprised he had heard them, but nodded agreement to his opinion.

Seanis looked at the older wilderknight, and nodded again. His look clearly testified to his concerns for Seanis's ability to do her part.

"We need to be able to count on everyone," Jof repeated, his expression giving no ground.

"Leave her alone," Clay said from his side. "She'll be fine. Next time. She'll be fine."

Seanis pledged – prayed – that Clay would be right.

* * *

Almost a week later, they awoke to a cloudy late-summer day. They expected rain, and a few hours later, they received massive thunderstorms that turned trails to rivulets of muddy water, and lit the sky with forked flashes of lightning. By mid-afternoon, the storms had passed, leaving the ground soft, wet, and strewn with leaves stripped from the trees by the wind.

"It's like fall, only green," Marious remarked as they set out on patrol.

They marched a muddied trail for several miles west, to where the path broke from the forest to cross a vast meadow. There they paused and evaluated the dangers.

"It's a half mile before the trail enters the next grove," Rinth remarked.

The meadow was thigh high in tall grass. The terrain sloped down to the low middle of the field, then rose again to the woods on the other side. The gray sky still hung low, casting the whole scene in subdued colors.

"Let's get the bows strung and fan out. They could be hiding in the tall grass, and we could pass right by them if we are not careful," Candace said. "Calvus, you want to take a group and circle right?"

"Sounds as good as anything else," he answered.

"You five come with me," Candace said, waving to Seanis and the four others nearest her.

The dozen wilderknights moved into the meadow taking divergent paths. Coming near midway, where the contours of the meadow collected the runoff, puddles of seeping water lay unseen below the tall, wet grass. Seanis could feel it wetting her boots and stockings, and was about to complain when a blaring horn called out.

She turned toward the sound, quickly found Calvus and the others, and immediately saw a wave of barbarians rushing toward them from the woods. The horn sounded again as the six on that side of the meadow fell back with great haste.

"Back to the woods!" Candace ordered. "Run!"

Twelve feet slogged through the wet ground back toward the trail and the woods from which they had come. As they ran, those with Candace put arrows to string and closed the distance as quickly as they could. But before they could join the others, the barbarians caught them. Eight barbarians came between the two groups of wilderknights, while dozens more charged Calvus and those with him.

Around Seanis, bows began to twang and arrows hissed. The interposing barbarians fell quickly, long before reaching Candace's group. Seanis did not shoot.

"Move on! Hurry!" Candace ordered, as the fastest Boeotians reached Calvus and his group.

Seanis hesitated. Seconds passed as the mayhem bloomed around her. When she set out after the others, she was a score of paces behind. She followed them until they came to Calvus and the others, who had turned to face the approaching attackers with swords drawn. Candace and her group began to release arrows from the flank, staying the barbarian advance. Seanis stopped, still lagging far behind, and watched, motionless, arrow nocked to string. Her team slung their bows over shoulders when the melee drew closer, and drew swords, ever moving back toward the woods.

In the distance a horn sounded, answering Calvus's earlier call.

Help comes, she thought. *Just hold on.*

Her friends shrank away from her toward the horn. She stood alone, her mind divided and feet anchored to the ground. She battled the memories the dream exploited against her. She wanted to flee, to join the others, but her feet would not listen.

Another horn sounded. Voices nearby came to her attention, turning her eyes away from the wilderknights and toward the enemy.

"Seanis, run!" Marious's voice reached her conscious, shrill and anxious.

Seanis stepped backward away from three barbarians who charged at her. One hurled a spear, but it fell short. An arrow hissed by her, striking the leading attacker squarely in the chest. The other two slowed.

At last Seanis released her arrow. With fluid motion she drew a second from her quiver

and let it sail, too. Her mind free for the moment, she fell back quickly, nocking arrows as she retreated, and four more Boeotians fell from the fight. As many more decided against pressing their attack.

United, the team of wilderknights moved with order away from the meadow, pushed toward the sound of the answering horns, and did their best to repel the assault. The barbarians steeled their courage and charged again. The wilderknights drew bows once more and turned them back.

"Waste no arrows!" Calvus called to them. "Make sure you hit your mark!"

In the grove of trees, among the trunks and underbrush, the barbarians were able to keep the chase without falling victim to the bows. As the wilderknights managed an orderly retreat, the Boeotians ran with abandon through the woods to come around them on all sides.

At that moment, a horn sounded again, this time much closer. Calvus answered with a blast as a group of attackers moved in. Deliberate resolve replaced Seanis's fear as she drew her sword. Around her the battle rolled, one way and then another. Horn blasts announced the arrival of more wilderknights as two more teams charged into the battle. Arrows whistled through the trees and the clatter of metal on metal rang out.

In time, the barbarians gave ground. They fell back toward the meadow, leaving nearly forty wilderknights to tend their wounds. And their dead.

"Rinth," Calvus ordered, "move north an arrow's flight… away from the noise we make here. Keep alert for their return."

"Do you think they'll be back?" Rinth asked.

"I am sure they will."

When the wounded were tended, Candace called for Rinth to return, and the wilderknights retreated to safer ground. They marched through the afternoon and came to one of their stations. There they found rest wherever they could in the waxing twilight, and waited for the expected return of the enemy.

An hour passed before they heard horns to the west. Another team of wilderknights was calling for help.

"Let's go!" Calvus called out.

Those able to fight joined him, and they set out into the darkness toward North Guard. Running, they coursed the five miles quickly, but upon arriving at the town, they found the stockade gate off its hinges, and flames leaping from the roofs of several buildings.

Seeing the sight brought a gasp from Seanis. For a moment, she returned to Drovers Rest, but she refused to give in to her fears.

Not this time, she decided.

She stayed with her team and the other wilderknights, and rushed toward the village. As they drew near, they found evidence of a fierce battle. Dead bodies of wilderknights, River Folk, and Boeotians lay scattered about, but no one moved.

At that moment, the sound of the horn came to them again – from further to the south.

"Nothing to do here," Candace declared. "Let's go."

Another half hour of jogging passed as Seanis and the others desperately followed the intermittent calls of the wilderknight signal horn. Each peal drew them closer to the battle, closer to the barbarians. Coming again out of a wooded grove into a clearing, at last Seanis and those with her reached the battle.

The darkness of the night was dispelled by a barn that burned, the flames revealing the

situation in flickered light. A large band of barbarians held ground between Seanis and what looked to be the surviving villagers of North Guard, the people of Willow Ridge, and about fifty other wilderknights.

"We come to the battle at our enemies' back," Jof declared.

"Let's take the advantage before it is too late!" Candace replied. "Let's go!"

Seanis swallowed hard, but her feet obeyed her and she stayed with her team. Her arrows flew straight and true until her quiver was empty. Her sword turned keen arcs, deadly to any that came into her reach.

Where her heart had raced earlier with panic, it now pounded with vigor. Her terror of the afternoon was gone. She had become a terror instead.

She was blind to the others around her, and blind, too, to her own pain. More than once, stones thrown from a distance struck her, and blood trickled from her forehead, stinging her eyes.

She paused to wipe her eyes and slow her breath. When she looked up, a trio of barbarians passed silhouetted against the burning barn. Her heart leapt, reminded vividly of the images in the dream.

The old memories crept toward the forefront of her thoughts, and she shuddered. Her sword froze in place, held stiffly between her and the barbarians. The scared nine-year-old took over, and Seanis froze in her tracks.

One rough looking young man a few years older than Seanis ventured close, desperation in his eyes. A half breath passed as his gaze locked with Seanis's and her sword dropped to her side. He approached her, a malevolent smile finding its way to his face, curved dagger in hand. Just as Seanis could clearly make out the details of his face, the nine-year-old relinquished control. Her sword became a blur and the barbarian fell before her.

Seanis knelt over the body and yanked away a necklace he wore.

When she arose, the faces of her enemies had lost all meaning. Her present had been severed from the past. The weight of her enduring horror had lifted, and she was free. The battle revolved around her, and she was stung by daggers and clubs, but dealt far worse than she received.

Minutes passed, uncounted, unmarked. The barbarians surged, gathered, and pressed to one side of the field, allowing Seanis's group to join the others to the south. The battle did not last long after that. Shortly, the barbarian raiding party gave flight, and the River Folk let them go.

The wilderknights gathered into teams to count wounded and identify dead. Few passed the battle unharmed and, from Seanis's team, Clay, as well as two of the others, were lost to eternity.

Graves were dug along the edge of the field for all the fallen, and the last of the dead was buried just as the sun slipped above the horizon. Finally, Candace led her team to an orchard nearby to make a camp.

* * *

Some time later Calvus returned from meeting with the village leaders and other wilderknight captains. He strode into the camp, face grim and stern.

"Nearly a third of our wilderknights died, so far. Three towns were lost, but most of the

villagers escaped. It looks like we hurt them badly, though. Maybe the spoils they took will be enough to satisfy them for a while, and maybe the fight we put up will give them second thoughts about coming back any time soon."

"Maybe," Jof replied.

"We can hope," Candace added.

Calvus inspected the rest of the team and met the eyes of Seanis, who had looked up from her hands when he started talking. He moved toward her and gestured for permission to have a seat nearby.

"Sure," Seanis replied.

He dropped his pack and pulled out a blanket, spreading it on the ground. As he sat down upon it, he looked back toward Seanis.

"What do you have there in your hands?" he asked.

Seanis's expression became distant and her brow furrowed. She shrugged, as if searching for the words.

"Oh, it's nothing. Just a spoil I took from the battle."

She held up the necklace and let it hang. On a leather cord hung six wooden beads and a mussel shell, on which was a white shape that closely resembled an acorn.

The End

Born in 1962, Bill Snodgrass grew up in a small Appalachian coal-mining town in Virginia. In 1967, he moved with his family to Kentucky and then Indiana before finally settling in Memphis, Tennessee in 1974. Bill currently resides in Memphis with his wife and two sons. When not working on writing, he develops web sites. Besides writing and working, Bill enjoys a wide variety of pastimes. Foremost in things taking up his time are coaching his son's baseball team, bass fishing, woodworking, and photography. For more information, check out his website: www.billsnodgrass.com.

Leave a note for the author on our Message Boards